

A Ripple In Time

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Summary: Emma is on her way to Granny's when a teen version of Regina Mills seemingly pops out of thin air and smacks right into her. Emma and present-day Regina must work together to figure out why the curious young teen is there and how to send her back before the past is irreparably changed, thus altering their entire lives in the present. Young!Regina AU. Rated T, subject to change.

***Chapter 1*: Chapter 1**

A/N: This is a little mini fic that was prompted to me on tumblr. It started out as a drabble, but then I received so many requests to continue, that it has now become a running mini-fic. The prompt was for either Emma or Regina to meet a younger version of the other and shenanigans ensue.

I will update a new chapter every time I build up a few new drabbles to compile together. I hope you enjoy this little fic. XO-Chrmdpoet

A Ripple in Time

Chapter One

"But I don't understand," Emma said, scratching at her head and staring at this younger and much more smiley version of Regina Mills. She still wasn't quite over the shock of the girl's sudden appearance. "How did you get here?"

"I am unsure," the younger Regina answered, biting her lip nervously as her widened eyes glanced around the strange place she had suddenly appeared in. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a singular braid and it fell over her shoulder as she turned her head right and left rapidly, trying to take in all of the detail.

"Oh my," she said, gasping and pointing beyond Emma. Emma turned to see a car driving past. "What is that strange contraption?" Regina squinted to see that a person was actually inside the large machine. She gasped again with the realization. "Tis a mode of transportation!" she practically squealed. "Oh my!"

Emma chuckled softly as she tried not to melt at how incredibly adorable this version of Regina was. She had yet to be hardened by the trials that she would later endure.

"Yeah, it's called a car."

"A car," Regina repeated. "It is truly amazing."

"Yeah, I guess it is if you think about it," Emma agreed, still laughing softly.

Regina turned to lock gazes with her then, and Emma could've sworn she could see the younger woman's soul in those deep chocolate pools. She was so open, so bright. It was breathtaking to witness, because despite her mother's stories of the young Regina, Emma had always had a hard time picturing such a thing.

The only Regina she knew was the hard-ass, quick-witted Mayor Regina, who was still entirely lovable in Emma's opinion, but definitely not soft and innocent and trusting like this young woman seemed to be.

"Emma, was it? Do I *know* you?" Regina asked, narrowing her eyes.

Ah, Emma thought, there's some of that classic Regina-Mills suspicion.

"Yeah, well, not *YOU* you," Emma said, scratching at her head again. How the hell was she supposed to explain this? She didn't even know what the hell was going on, and though the rational part of her knew she should call Regina, uh...present-day Regina, another part of her just wanted to keep this younger, sweeter Regina a secret—all to herself. "But the future you. You're uh...you're quite a ways into the future."

The young Regina gasped again, her eyes widening comically. "The future?" she asked. "Have I been transported here with magic?"

"I think so."

"Oh my gods," Regina said quietly. "How many years have I here?"

"Huh?" Emma asked, her face scrunching. "Oh, like you mean how old are you here?"

"Yes."

Emma didn't quite know how to answer. She didn't want to tell the truth because it was obvious that this version of Regina didn't actually know that she would later become the Evil Queen, so trying to explain to her that time was stopped for nearly thirty years, so she's like both thirty-two and sixty would be way too complicated.

"Uh..." Emma muttered. "You're thirty-two."

Regina's eyes lit up as she quickly asked, "And have I a husband?"

"No."

The brunette's face fell then. "Why haven't I married?" she asked Emma, looking as if she had completely failed at life somehow. It made Emma's stomach turn. The more she learned about the ways of the Enchanted Forest, the more thankful she was that she hadn't grown up there.

"Look, uh, Regina...little Regina...whatever. It's a long story. We need to focus on why you're here and like how to get you back."

"Oh yes," Regina said, attempting to plaster on a smile. "Very well. May I ask how it is that I know you?"

"We have a son together."

Regina's gasp was loud and violent. "Oh my gods, no. I've grown into a... a..."

"A what?" Emma asked, confused. "A mother?"

Regina lowered her voice to a barely audible whisper. "A lesbian."

Emma's face paled considerably before she simply burst into loud laughter, while Regina continued to worry at her bottom lip and mutter, "Mother will surely be displeased to learn of this."

Emma's laughter instantly died in her throat as she noticed a familiar figure approaching them from across the street. It was Mary Margaret.

Shit, Emma thought. I can't let her know what's going on here. She'll instantly suggest that we call Regina and then this will all be over way too soon.

"Uh, listen, don't say anything to this lady walking over here," Emma told the younger Regina quickly. "Just like glare at her or whatever, trust me, and if you have to say something, say something mean or insulting."

Regina didn't have time to ask questions, as Mary Margaret reached them in that moment. The pixie-haired woman gaped at the younger Regina, no doubt feeling as if she had just stepped into the past.

"What...what's going on?" she asked. "Regina why are y—"

"Uh, Regina was just showing me what she looked like when she was younger, because I couldn't picture it."

"Oh?" Mary Margaret glanced back to Regina again, eyes narrowed. "Is that so?"

Regina panicked as she realized that she had to say something to this woman, and Emma had specifically told her to say something insulting or mean. That was not a practice she was terribly familiar with, so she hesitated at first before blurting out, "Short hair is improper for a lady to wear. Your sheared locks make you appear as a man."

Emma face-palmed as Mary Margaret continued to stare at them suspiciously, saying nothing about Regina's comment. She was used to being insulted by the woman, but that had just seemed terribly weak for Regina.

"Emma, is there som—"

"Uh, we gotta go," Emma said quickly, grabbing the younger Regina's hand and yanking her away from Mary Margaret. This was going to be harder than she anticipated, and god, she didn't even want to think about what might happen if they accidentally ran into Henry or worse, this world's Regina.

"Why are we fleeing that woman?" young Regina asked as Emma tugged her along down the street by her hand. "And why is it that I must insult her?"

"That's my mom," Emma told her, "and we're not fleeing, exactly. We're just trying to avoid being asked too many questions. She knew something was off. That insult was weak."

"In my defense," the young brunette said, "I hardly make a practice of harsh words and degradation."

Emma snorted with laughter at that. "Oh lord, if only you knew the future."

"Pardon?" Regina asked. "May I ask what it is that you mean?"

"Listen, let's not get into all that," Emma told her. "It's just...it would be too much for you to know right now, okay? But I will tell you this—I had you insult my mom because well, future you doesn't get along very well with her."

"Oh," the teen said, nodding, "had you and I a falling out? Or is your mother merely lacking in support of our pairing?"

Emma's face turned a bright red as she finally stopped their walking and turned to face the younger woman. "Me and Regina; I mean, you...uh, I mean, the older you. It's not what you're thinking."

"Are we no longer a pairing?" Regina asked her, brows furrowing as she squeezed Emma's hand. "Have I displeased you in some way?"

Emma's heart involuntarily clenched in her chest as she heard the worry in the brunette's voice. She found herself wondering, in that moment, just how much of this beautiful, innocent, and blatantly self-conscious creature still lived in the Regina of this world. She could imagine that much of her did, regardless of how well the older Regina hid her—pushed her as far beneath the surface as she could manage.

"No, no," Emma told her quickly. "Nothing like that. I like you a lot, actually. We just...we fight sometimes, but we're not a cou—"

"Ma?"

"Shit!" Emma hissed, whirling around to see her son coming out of Granny's. She had been on her way to meet him there when a teenaged version of Regina Mills literally popped out of thin air and into her path. He must have seen them through the window and came out. Emma cursed herself for not being more careful, but she had been in such a rush to get away from Mary Margaret that she hadn't paid attention to where they were going.

"Emma!" little Regina snapped, squeezing the blonde's hand as they were still intertwined. "It is improper for a lady to swear."

"Shit," Emma muttered again, as Henry made his way across the street. "What the hell do we do?"

But she had little time to think of anything when Henry was suddenly right in front of her. "Hey, uh, what's—" The boy instantly halted his speech as he gaped at the teen version of his mother. "Mom?!" he choked out, staring right at her.

"Pardon?" young Regina asked, completely taken aback by the boy's declaration of her as his mother. She then recalled Emma saying that they shared a son. Her face instantly transformed, a joyous smile bursting across her lips. "Oh, you must be my son!" she exclaimed happily. She then squeezed Emma's hand. "Oh Emma, we obviously did well. He is beautiful!"

"HUH?!" Henry practically shouted, his eyes locking onto the two intertwined hands in front of him. "Okay, seriously, what is going on? Why are you guys holding hands and why does Mom look like that and why is she acting like she doesn't know me?!"

His voice had risen to an unnaturally high octave in his panic as he leveled a pointed, very Regina-like glare at his blonde mother.

"Uh..." Emma muttered. "Uh...I suppose you wouldn't buy that this is all an elaborate joke and we're just screwing with you, would you, kid?"

Henry just arched a brow at her and propped his hands on his hips. "What's wrong with her, Ma?"

Emma sighed heavily. Everyone was apparently intent on ruining all her fun. Furthermore, how the hell was she supposed to explain something that she herself didn't understand?

***Chapter 2*: Chapter 2**

A/N: Thank you all so much for the wonderful and supportive response to this story, and it's first chapter. I'm thrilled to know you are enjoying thus far. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Two

"Nothing's wrong with her!" Emma hissed quietly, glancing quickly around to make sure they weren't drawing any unwanted attention. So far, so good. "She's fine. She's just...well, she's not your mom."

"What?" Henry asked, completely bewildered.

At the same time, teen Regina squeezed Emma's hand, their fingers still interlocked as if Emma was afraid that the teen was going to run off on her own or step into the street without looking both ways first, and said, "I thought we produced him together. Is that not what you said?"

Emma's head snapped around so fast that it audibly popped and she nearly lost her balance. The matter at hand completely left her mind as she gaped at the teen version of Regina and practically shouted, "The *hell* you mean we *produced* him together?"

"Pardon?" Regina asked her, unsure as to why the blonde seemed so thoroughly shocked. "He is *our* child, yes? That would imply that we produced him together, would it not?"

"Well, the last time I checked, two women couldn't make babies together," Emma told her, still staring at the brunette as if she had two heads.

"Of course they can," Regina said simply. "There is little that magic is incapable of. I hardly support the use of magic. I believe it corrupts absolutely, but my mother is rather...*adept* with it; however, I suppose I would support the use of magic in such instances as creating life."

"Okay," Henry interjected. "Now I get what you mean. That's definitely *not* my mom."

"No but seriously," Emma said, still gaping, "that's like really freaking cool. You gotta use turkey basters or whatever here."

"Ma," Henry deadpanned, snapping his fingers at his blonde mother to bring her back to the important matter at hand—such as who the hell this girl was that looked just like his mother but was most certainly *not* the woman who had raised him his entire life.

"Right, yeah," Emma said, shaking her head. "Henry's right—the more you talk, the less you sound like Regina."

"HENRY?!" the young woman exclaimed, a mega smile blasting across her face. She squeezed Emma's hand so hard that the blonde winced in pain before she completely let go and launched herself at Henry. She cupped his cheeks in her hands and smiled brightly at him.

"Uh, yeah?" Henry asked her.

"You are named after my father," she said softly, still smiling as she stroked her thumb over his cheek. "He is such a kind and gentle man. I'm glad to know I have passed his name along to my son."

Henry slowly lifted his own hands and patted his young mother's arms awkwardly. "Um, yeah, thanks." He then cut his gaze over to Emma who was shrugging and biting her lip. "Seriously, Ma. What happened?"

"I don't know, kid," Emma told him honestly, gently reaching out to pull Regina back so that she would release their son's face, which was still held in captivity. "This is like your mom from the past or whatever. She just LITERALLY popped right out of the sky or something."

Before Henry could say another word, little Regina interjected—launching into a quick ramble of questions. "Speaking of my father, where is he? Are my parents well? Do they live in this strange kingdom as well? Where in

the Enchanted Forest are we? My, it certainly has changed. I never expected such advancements in only sixteen years. Was magic involved?"

"Erm...well, you see...um..." Emma hesitated. She didn't know if she should tell Regina the truth about her parents or that they weren't in the Enchanted Forest or anywhere even remotely near it. She didn't know what she was allowed to say and what she wasn't. Like, could she accidentally change the past or something? "Your parents are—"

"Dead," a harsh and ragged, yet terrifyingly familiar voice growled, cutting in from behind them.

All three whirled around, following the sound, dread pooling in both Henry and Emma's stomachs. There stood the present-day Regina Mills in all her infuriated glory, a mere thirty feet or so away from them. How no one had heard her coming was beyond them, unless she had appeared by magic.

She stood glaring at them, her hands propped on her hips and her jaw rigidly set. She was a mixture of emotions—shock, worry, confusion—but most of all, anger. What the hell was going on here? And how much had this *other* version of herself spilled about her unfortunate past?

"Shit," Emma muttered.

Henry bit his lip as he whispered, "Uh oh."

The younger version of Regina merely gaped at her older self. "Mother would certainly *never* approve of my wearing such a short skirt."

The older Regina cleared her throat as she continued to glare at them all before fiercely locking her gaze onto Emma's. "Explain," she bit out. "Now."

Emma's face was riddled with guilt despite the fact that she hadn't technically done anything wrong. It wasn't her fault that little Regina had just popped out of thin air and nearly sent her toppling to the ground in surprise. She had just been trying to manage the situation as best she could.

Still, she bit her lip nervously under the heat of Regina's glare as she muttered, "Er..."

Henry echoed his birthmother, an "Er..." of his own slipping from his lips as he wore a similar expression to Emma's, despite him also having had nothing to do with this situation.

The young Regina glanced from Emma to Henry, confused by their reactions, before merely attempting to reconcile whatever it was that had caused such tension. She smiled a little awkwardly at her older self, though bright nonetheless, and said, "You are...I..." She laughed at herself for a moment before trying once more. "We, I suppose is best, are quite beautiful at thirty-two."

Regina wasn't amused. She put a hand up to signify that her younger self should stop talking before turning back to Emma. "Well?"

"Erm, see," Emma began, scratching at the back of her head. "See, what had happened was...you, well not *you*, but you know, you *her* you..." She turned to point at the younger Regina who just sort of awkwardly waved.

"Do get to the point, Miss Swan," Regina snapped. "I have little patience for your blabbering excuses. Spit it out already."

Young Regina's brows furrowed at that. She leaned forward just slightly so that her mouth was hovering just behind Emma's right ear. "Am I always this terribly rude?"

"Yes, dear, I am," Regina barked at her, having overheard. Her hands were clasped tightly atop her hips as she stared down her younger self. "And *you* are terribly naive."

"Okay whoa," Emma cut in. "Self-hatred is not the answer, Regina."

"Oh can it, Emma," Regina snapped. "This is a mess. I need to know what happened and how she came to be here. Do you realize that every minute she spends here is a minute we risk changing my past, and do you know

what *that* means, dear?" She spoke as if Emma was the slowest person she had ever met.

"Uh, bad things?" Emma asked, shrugging and looking totally lost. She glanced over at Henry, who mirrored her actions again.

He then looked up at his brunette mother. "How bad?" he asked her.

Regina's gaze softened greatly as she turned toward her son, something that neither Emma nor the younger Regina missed. "Henry, could you please wait inside Granny's? I need to speak with Miss Swan about this little *situation*."

"But I wanna know," Henry argued. "I could help."

"Henry," Regina said sternly. "Please do as I say."

Henry huffed out a breath and kicked his foot against the sidewalk before trudging back across the street and into the diner. As soon as he was safely inside the building, Regina turned back toward Emma and her younger self.

"Emma," she said, her tone turning grave, enough to make Emma's stomach lurch uncomfortably, "this is serious. Any changes to my past could alter my future, which could alter *your* future and Henry's. All that we have here is delicate. She needs to go back where she came from and as soon as possible."

The younger version of the Mayor glanced back and forth between Emma and her older self, feeling highly uncomfortable and now even a little frightened about the situation she found herself in. Whatever past she was destined to live must be terribly important, and she didn't want to do anything that might jeopardize her future with her son or...with Emma.

"I apologize for causing such a stir," she said softly, ducking her head a bit in shame.

"Oh, hey," Emma replied gently, turning to comfort the younger woman, forgetting for a moment that that younger woman's older self was watching.

"It's not your fault, okay? Don't feel bad."

She rubbed her hands up and down the teen's arms, and the older Regina watched, eyes alight with curiosity and intrigue. It was surprising to see how gentle Emma was with her younger self, surprising and maybe even a bit heartwarming.

The Mayor did her best to soften a bit in that moment, because she realized that she was going to have to be able to communicate with her younger self if she was going to be successful in correcting this strange happening. She knew better than anyone that her younger self was pure and wouldn't respond well to a clipped attitude. So, Regina forced herself to relax, lightened her tone a bit, and asked, "How old are you right now?"

The younger Regina kept her head ducked as she obediently answered, "I have sixteen years."

"Wow, Regina," Emma said, nodding and turning to grin teasingly at the Mayor, "you were so sweet and cute at sixteen. What happened?"

Regina scoffed before rolling her eyes at the blonde. "Your mother happened, Miss Swan."

"May I ask a question?" the teen Regina cut in, a little timid but still wanting to learn and know as much as she could.

"Sure," Emma said at the same time that the Mayor answered, "What?"

The teen giggled a bit before looking at her older self and quietly asking, "Why do you refer to Emma as 'Miss Swan'? I rather imagined you would consistently address her by her given name, but you referred to her as 'Miss Swan' more than once. Is that a strange custom for lovers in this kingdom?"

"Oh crap," Emma muttered at the same time that Regina's eyes blew wide, the brunette sucking in a sharp gasp.

***Chapter 3*: Chapter 3**

Chapter Three

The Mayor's lips parted instantly, eyes wide and angry and locked hard onto Emma. Before the brunette could utter a word, though, Emma quickly put her hands up in a show of surrender and said, "Let's not freak out or anything. Total misunderstanding."

Regina's eyes narrowed then. "She said *lover*, Miss Swan," she hissed. "Why *exactly* would my younger self think that you and I, of all people, are *lovers*?"

Emma noted the way that Regina spit that word out, "lover", as if it was dirty and foul, or maybe it was the thought of Emma as her lover that she found dirty and foul. If the former, then Emma could simply dismiss it as Regina's I'm-way-too-proper attitude. If it was the latter, though...well then, the Sheriff was thoroughly offended.

Emma sighed and tilted her head to suggest that she and Regina step aside for a private word. Regina just nodded, so Emma turned back to the teen brunette and said, "Hey, um, Regina. I need to talk to...well, *you*, old you." Emma winced when she heard the angry huff from behind her. "I mean, older you. So, just, uh, stay here for a minute, okay? Stay."

The Mayor scoffed from behind her again. "Do avoid speaking to me, *her*, as if she is a dog, Miss Swan."

Emma rolled her eyes and reached out to pat little Regina's arm. "Sorry. Excuse me," she said, stressing the words and rolling her eyes. "Younger, *entirely human* version of Regina, could you please wait here while I talk to the older, *entirely rude* version of you?"

The teen just giggled and nodded. "You are quite strange," she laughed out.

Emma just kind of shrugged and patted her arm again before stepping over to where the older Regina was waiting with a scowl on her face. So,

basically, she looked the way she always did.

"Care to explain what that was about?" Regina snapped in a whisper when Emma walked over to her.

"She thinks we're a couple," Emma explained.

"Yes, I gathered as much. Why?"

"Right after she got here, she asked me if she knew me. I told her that you and I share a son together, and she just jumped to the conclusion that that meant we were together." Emma shrugged after explaining, and Regina let out a long sigh while pressing her fingertips to her forehead as if simply existing in that moment gave her a headache.

"Also," Emma added, grinning and reaching over to nudge Regina playfully, "she said your mother wouldn't be very happy about you being a lesbo."

Regina pushed Emma's elbow away, glaring at her, but couldn't hold back the soft laugh that escaped shortly after. "Well, she is certainly right about that," she replied. "Mother would not have been pleased."

Emma's brows furrowed then. "Wait, are you saying that you *are* a les—"

Regina completely cut her off, ignoring that the blonde had spoken, though Emma detected the slightest hint of pink to the woman's cheeks. "It seems she did not catch my reference to the fact that both Mother and Daddy are deceased. Otherwise, I imagine she'd be quite emotional. It is probably better that she doesn't know anyway, so that is well and done."

"Yeah, okay," Emma agreed, and then quickly waved that off, "but back to what you were saying before. Were you implying that you're a—"

"I'm, of course, going to require all the details of how she came to be here," Regina said, cutting her off again, and Emma let out a heavy sigh. When Regina Mills didn't want to talk about something, then NOBODY was going to be talking about it.

"Well," Emma answered, shrugging, "good luck with that, because I don't have a clue and neither does she. She literally just popped right out of thin air."

"She didn't *pop* out of *thin air*, Miss Swan," Regina drawled as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "That would be entirely ridiculous. There is obviously magic at play, and she likely came through a ripple."

"A ripple?"

"In time, yes." Regina answered, nodding. "Who opened the ripple, though, is entirely beyond me."

Regina determined that it was best if they not all be seen out in the open when there was a walking copy of her on display. There were too many risks involved, the primary of which being that too many in Storybrooke bore grudges against the former Evil Queen. It would be all too easy for someone to attack or manipulate her younger self, thus altering the past and present and likely ending Regina's life entirely.

That is how they (Emma, Regina, Regina, and Henry) found themselves in the kitchen of 108 Mifflin Street.

"This is our home?" Teen Regina asked for the third time as she gaped at the large kitchen, her gaze darting all around to take in every detail.

Henry giggled, snorting in a way that was all too similar to Emma. The Mayor expected to feel that small flash of pain, anger, or jealousy that she sometimes felt when she noticed similarities between Emma and Henry, but instead, she found her heart-rate sped up a bit. She found it endearing, especially when Emma was there to grin goofily at him afterwards.

Regina was more than aware that she and the Savior had developed an odd, sometimes tense, but overall quite satisfying friendship over the course of Emma's time in Storybrooke. It was still strange, however, when Regina recognized herself opening up to the blonde, drawn to and appreciative of Emma. There were times even (though Regina would swallow her own

sleeping curse before admitting it aloud) when the brunette actually craved the Savior's presence.

Because sometimes, it felt like Emma was her only friend; at least, the only one who understood her without words.

"You've already asked like three times," Henry said, laughing.

"And the answer is still yes, dear," Regina added, unable to stop the small smile from pulling at her lips.

"How is it that we have come to have such a home?" Little Regina asked. "Is Emma royalty?"

Hilariously, both Emma and Regina responded at the same time. "No," Emma scoffed while Regina answered, "Yes."

They stopped and looked at one another, Emma's face scrunched as if she was torn between laughter and confusion.

"What?" the Mayor blurted. "You ARE royalty."

"Well, I guess *technically*," Emma began, but Regina shook her head and cut her off.

"No dear, not *technically*, *actually*," the brunette interjected. "Your parents are the rightful heirs to the White Kingdom, though so help me if you ever tell your mother I said that, I will—"

"—destroy me if it's the last thing you do?" Emma asked, smirking.

Henry laughed out loud at that as Regina just narrowed her eyes, a smile tugging at her lips, and said, "Indeed."

"I am quite confused," the young Regina cut in. "I understand that Emma is royalty, but if we are not bound in marriage, then is it not improper for us to be living together?"

"It's so improper," Emma laughed out, joking. Henry cracked up too, but Regina just rolled her eyes at the pair of them.

"We don't live together," she told her younger self, "and for the record, *I* am royalty. You eventually will be as well. It's a long story, so don't ask, but trust me when I say, we are queens."

The younger Regina's eyes bulged at that. "Queens?"

"Queens," Henry reiterated, nodding and grinning at how sweet and innocent this 16-year-old version of his mother was.

"Oh my goodness," the teen replied in a soft gasp. "Mother will certainly be satisfied."

And then the room became uncomfortably quiet.

"So!" Emma said, clapping her hands together to break the sudden, awkward silence. She then quickly changed the subject. "Little Regina..." She stopped, hesitating. "Uh, do you totally hate that I'm calling you that? Because if I was sixteen, it would probably bug me if someone called me 'Little Emma'."

"It is somewhat bothersome," the teen answered, tilting her head to the side in consideration. Her long braid falling over her shoulder. "However, I recognize the need for specificity."

"Why do you talk like that?" Henry asked, scrunching his face. "You're so proper. I mean, Mom's proper, too, but you're like *really* proper."

Regina chuckled softly at her son as the younger version of her narrowed her eyes at Henry and countered, "Why do *you* speak so *improperly*?"

That definitely surprised Henry. His eyes bugged out for a minute before he smiled slyly, a smile that was all Regina. Emma just laughed, nudged Henry's shoulder, and said, "I think the appropriate response here is 'Touché'."

They all just chuckled together before Henry shrugged and asked, "So, should we give you a nickname, then?"

"A nickname?" little Regina asked, and the older version of herself stiffened. The Mayor could only imagine the strange and likely embarrassing sort of nicknames that Emma and Henry could produce together if given time to think. Her teen-aged self would likely end up being called something terribly ridiculous and be entirely unaware of just how ridiculous it was.

"Yeah, like a shortened version of your name or a name that represents you or something you like," Emma told her, and the teen nodded in understanding.

"Very well," she said with a smile. She then turned to the Mayor and asked, "Do *you* have a nickname?"

Regina scoffed. "Of course not," she answered. "I am a queen."

Emma and Henry both snickered at that. "I think maybe you're forgetting, Regina," Emma teased, "that you *do* have *one* nickname, one pretty *famous* nickname."

Regina's eyes flashed a warning in Emma and Henry's direction. She knew exactly what they were referring to, but she couldn't have her younger self finding out too much about the future; at least, not the part where she became a murdering witch.

Regina narrowed her eyes at the goofballs that were her son and his other mother, and communicated with her gaze that she did not find that remark funny in the slightest. She then cleared her throat and said, "*That* was not a nickname. It was a title, and I used it for very specific reasons."

"Strike fear in the hearts of millions!" Emma joked, laughing, and Regina just rolled her eyes.

"Why would you need to strike fear in the hearts of millions?" teen Regina asked, brows furrowed as she looked to her older self.

Regina stalled for a moment before completely lying. "I wouldn't."

Her younger self only became more confused then. "But Emma said—"

"Yes, well," Regina snapped, "*Emma* is an idiot. In fact, that is *her* nickname, and you may call her that at leisure."

Emma rolled her eyes even as she cracked up. She wasn't even irritated by the dig, because this entire situation was just incredibly bizarre and honestly, a little exciting. She was in the best mood, and she'd be lying if she didn't at least admit to herself that she was really enjoying the chance to see Regina's younger self. It was a fascinating experience, and maybe, Emma thought, she could learn a little about what Regina was like before everything apparently went to shit.

"Yeah, yeah," Emma said, grinning like the idiot that Regina had claimed her to be. "So, what if we call her Gina?"

The Mayor instantly shuddered and scoffed. "Absolutely not. I refuse to be referred to as Gina."

"But it's not even *you*," Emma started to argue, but Regina just shook her head. She wasn't having it.

"Fine," Emma huffed. "We could just call her 'Two'."

"Huh?" Henry asked.

"You know," Emma told him, "like Regina 2.0?"

No one really seemed to care for that one either, so Emma threw out another idea. "Queenie?" she suggested.

Henry laughed at that one. "I like it," he said happily.

At the same time, Regina muttered under her breath, "Childish."

"But I am not yet a queen," teen Regina responded, shaking her head.

"Alright fine," Emma said. "Since the two Reginas are both spoil-sports, how about we make this easy and just call you 'R'?"

"R," Henry said with a firm nod. Regina merely shrugged as if it was acceptable but only just, and little Regina nodded and said, "Very well."

"Cool," Emma replied. "So, R, why don't you go with Henry for a bit, and he can show you the TV or something while I talk to Regina about how to get you back to your time?"

"What is a tee vee?" R asked, and Emma just shook her head and motioned for Henry to take her to the living room. He laughed and grabbed R's hand, pulling her out of the kitchen.

As soon as they disappeared around the corner, Emma felt a hard smack to the back of her head. "Ow," she hissed, turning to look at Regina. "What the hell was that for?"

"Are you *trying* to change the past?" Regina drawled, hands now planted on her hips.

"So, I joked about the Evil-Queen thing," Emma said, shrugging. "It's not a big deal. I didn't *say* it."

"Mmhm," Regina hummed sourly. "See how you feel about it when you no longer exist."

Emma followed Regina as the brunette made her way to the breakfast bar to take a seat. "Well, I'm guessing I wouldn't feel *anything* about it, *Queenie*, because I *WOULDN'T EXIST*."

***Chapter 4*: Chapter 4**

A/N: Thank you everyone for the wonderful feedback and support for this little story. I'm so glad you are enjoying it! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Four

Regina flipped quickly through the aged pages of old spellbooks and magical tomes that she had summoned from her vault to the kitchen table. Emma sat across from her, chin resting in her palm as her arm was propped atop the table. She sighed loudly, bored, as she watched Regina flip through the pages.

She had tried to help read through the books with her, but that had been a mostly futile effort given that the majority of the books were written in magic or in elvish (as Regina told her, to which Emma had snorted loudly and laughed only to realize that the woman was entirely serious) or in runes.

"Do stop whining, Miss Swan," Regina drawled without looking up as she heard Emma's sigh.

"I'm not whining," Emma grumbled, glaring at Regina across the table. "Did I say anything? Nope. So, yeah, not whining."

"You're sighing like a five-year-old being forced to sit still," Regina argued, again without looking up. It irritated Emma.

"Whatever," the blonde scoffed. "This is boring."

"Would you rather play hide-and-seek, dear?" Regina quipped, rolling her eyes as she moved on to a different book.

Emma's brow quirked for a split-second. The children's game actually sounded like a much more fulfilling and entertaining activity than what they were now doing. "Nah," she said after a minute, though. "You would just cheat."

Regina's head popped up then. "I do *not* cheat," she denied, "at anything."

"Psh," Emma scoffed. "Villains always cheat."

"Oh, so I'm a villain again?" Regina asked, pinning Emma with a glare. "Do enlighten me, dear. What dastardly plan do I have hidden away? What nefarious plot have you uncovered?"

Emma sighed dramatically. "You know that is not even what I meant," she told the brunette. "I don't mean that you *are* a villain, but you *were*, so I'm pretty sure you wouldn't freak about cheating at a game of hide-and-seek. Hell, if I had magic, I would probably cheat, too."

"You *do* have magic," Regina deadpanned.

"I meant if I had working magic."

"You *do* have working magic," Regina said, leaning back and crossing her arms over her chest. She smirked at Emma as she then said, "There is a difference between having working magic and actually knowing how to work it."

Emma bobbed her head and rolled her eyes. "Go back to your books, Regina. Cockiness doesn't suit you."

"Oh but it does, dear," Regina argued, clucking her tongue as she grinned wickedly and went back to her spellbooks. "Cockiness is my signature color, just after black."

Emma tried not to smile, but she felt the tug at the corners of her lips anyway. She sighed and shook her head.

As they fell into silence, Emma's boredom became nearly unbearable. She alternated between making extremely annoying sounds with her lips and drumming her fingers against the tabletop. Regina merely ignored her, only looking up every few minutes to shoot her a glare.

"So..." Emma drawled after several long moments. "Little you is pretty different from *you* you."

Regina didn't look up, but Emma saw one perfectly sculpted brow raise. "Eloquent wording, dear."

Emma ignored her and plowed ahead. "She seems pretty sweet."

"Mm," Regina hummed, not commenting further, and Emma was surprised to see a blush creep over the brunette's cheeks.

"I'm guessing that means that this is before all the bad stuff happened or whatever?" Emma asked softly after a minute, a little nervous of wading out into these sensitive waters. She knew that Regina was very guarded about her past, but Emma was hoping that maybe she could finally learn a little more about it. After all, it would be kind of difficult for Regina to keep it guarded when it was literally in the next room.

Regina cleared her throat roughly, and Emma took it as a warning to back off just before the brunette quietly snapped, "Yes."

"Kay," Emma responded, recognizing the unspoken command to drop the subject. So, she did.

A tense silence enveloped them after that, and it made Emma's skin crawl. She could only handle a few seconds of it before she drummed her fingers against the table again and awkwardly blurted out, "Did you know that lesbians didn't have to use turkey basters to make babies in the Enchanted Forest?"

Regina choked on her own saliva as her head snapped up and her face scrunched in surprise and confusion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"R said that people of the same sex can make babies together in the Enchanted Forest," Emma told her, her cheeks and neck flushing a bright red, though the blonde didn't have a clue as to why. "You know, like without..." She dropped her voice to a mumble and quietly said, "...sperm."

She then realized what she had said, cleared her throat, and clarified, "Well, I guess unless it was a *male* same-sex couple. Then it would be without an

egg or whatever. Okay, um, I'm shutting up now."

Regina blinked several times, merely gaping at Emma for a long moment, before she shook her head and said, "How in the hell did you land on such a topic with my younger self?"

Emma sighed, "She made a comment about us having 'produced' Henry together."

Regina's face scrunched, and Emma quickly added, "Her words, not mine."

"I see," Regina said, nodding and avoiding Emma's eyes, "and did you correct her?"

"Yeah, of course," Emma answered, her own eyes practically devouring the table as she picked pointlessly at her fingernails. "I mean, I didn't understand what she meant by that, but then she said that same-sex couples could make babies in the Enchanted Forest with magic or whatever. Is that true?"

Regina sighed as she closed the spellbook in front of her, sat back in her chair, and looked at Emma.

"What?" Emma blurted. "Why are you sighing at me like that?"

"Because apparently you would rather have a conversation about magical reproduction," Regina told her, pinning Emma with a glare that the blonde noticed had hardly any fire behind it, "than focus on our impending dooms."

"Really, Regina?" Emma deadpanned. "Our *impending dooms*? Dramatic much?"

Regina huffed out an annoyed breath, ignoring Emma's comment before simply saying, "Yes, it is possible for same-sex couples to reproduce via magic in the Enchanted Forest."

"Seriously?" Emma exclaimed, eyes widening. "That is totally awesome. How come I've never heard about this before?"

"That would probably be because it isn't a common practice," Regina explained. "It was much more prevalent when I was young, such as R is now, but the practice died off rather quickly. It was still possible, but many of the sorcerers who lived in our land vacated, were killed and drained, or went into hiding."

"Why?" Emma asked. "And what do you mean 'drained'?"

"Black Market," Regina told her, shrugging a shoulder. "Various types of magic became high-dollar items on the Market. The purer the magic, the higher the bounty. Thus, sorcerers were captured and drained, and by that, I mean literally drained of their magic. It was bled from their veins and bottled."

"Holy shit," Emma gasped. "That's so fuc—"

"Uh, Moms?"

Regina and Emma both turned in their seats to see their son lingering awkwardly in the doorway of the kitchen. His face was scrunched into an expression of extreme discomfort as he then quietly said, "R needs to um... use the bathroom, and uh..."

"What?" Emma asked, completely confused. How hard was it to go to the damn bathroom?

Regina, though, quickly shot to her feet. "I will take care of it," she answered before anyone could say another word. "Where is she, Henry?"

"Bathroom by the den," Henry answered, watching his mother move swiftly past him and out of the kitchen.

"Uh, what was that about kid?" Emma asked, still confused.

Henry just giggled now that it was just him and Emma. "I think she was scared of the toilet."

Regina knocked at the bathroom door before reaching for the knob. She rested her head against the wood of the door. "R?" she called quietly. When she received no answer, Regina turned the knob and poked her head into the small crack where the door was now open, worried.

She bit her lip to keep from laughing as she saw her younger self backed all the way against the wall opposite the toilet, almost as if the teen was trying to melt into the wall. Her wide chocolate eyes were fixed on the toilet, and Regina could clearly see a mixture of emotions swirling in their depths—confusion, shock, fear, intrigue.

"R," she said again, stepping into the bathroom and closing the door behind her. "Are you alright?"

"I..." R started before hesitating. Her hand came out, pointing at the toilet. "Henry said I was to use this device and then press the lever once I was finished."

Regina smiled at her younger self. "Yes, that's correct."

"But the lever creates a swirling vortex," R argued. "He showed me."

"Yes," Regina chuckled. "It's nothing to be afraid of."

"So, I..." She was obviously very wary of the device as she inched a little nearer it. "I am to actually sit upon this device?"

"Yes," Regina said again. "You sit over the opening, do your business, and then flush once you are finished."

"Will I not be sucked into the vortex?" R asked her, and Regina had to bite her lip again, because the extreme sincerity in the teen's voice was overwhelmingly humorous. She was glad that she was here to handle this, because there was no way that Emma would have been unable to keep from laughing, and Regina hated to even consider the idea of *any* version of herself being humiliated.

"No, dear," she answered. "It's not magic. It's called plumbing, and it is merely water. It is perfectly safe and much more sanitary than what you are accustomed to back home."

"You use this device then?"

"I do," Regina told her, nodding and offering the girl an encouraging smile. "Would it help you to know that when I first encountered these devices, I was a bit timid as well?"

R let out an awkward, yet adorable giggle as she smiled tentatively at Regina and nodded. "Yes, thank you," she whispered. "That makes me feel a bit better."

"Good," Regina said, smiling at her still. "Are you okay to try now?"

"Yes, I believe so," R told her, nodding and moving a little closer to the toilet.

"Would you like me to stay?" Regina asked her. "Or I can wait just outside the door if you need me."

"That would be..." R nodded, her cheeks flushing. "Yes, just outside the door. Thank you."

"Okay," Regina told her before turning back toward the door. "Just let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you," R whispered again, and Regina slipped out of the bathroom.

When she closed the door behind her and turned, she came face to face with a smirking Savior. Emma was leaning against the wall just outside the bathroom with her arms crossed over her chest, looking like she was only just holding back her laughter.

Regina pinned her with a glare and quietly whispered, "Don't you dare laugh at her."

Emma just grinned at her and shook her head. "Wouldn't dream of it, Queenie."

"Stop calling me that."

Emma just chuckled softly. "Were you really afraid of the toilets when you first came here?"

Regina's glare only intensified before the brunette dropped her chin to her chest, gaze devouring the floor. She then quietly admitted, "I was...*surprised* by many things."

Emma knew that "surprised" was really just a substitute word for "afraid." Regina would never admit to being afraid of anything, not truly; at least, she never had before, and Emma would be surprised to ever hear her do so. She had seen Regina be afraid, but she had never heard the brunette actually voice it. "Worried" was as far as they had ever gotten.

Regina then looked up at her again and grinned in a way that made Emma's stomach clench inexplicably. Her chocolate eyes shone with mirth as she said, "You should have seen my reaction to the television."

Emma laughed out loud then.

***Chapter 5*: Chapter 5**

Chapter Five

"Don't touch it," Henry warned, reaching up to jerk R's hand back before the teen could touch the red-metal panels visible on the inside of the toaster where two slices of bread were cooking. "It's hot. You'll get burned."

"Oh, I see," R said, nodding. "Thank you." She let her hand drop to her side, but she kept her face quite close to the device, peering down into it as it worked. "How long until the bread is properly cooked?"

Henry giggled at her wording. "Uh, probably just a few more seconds. It's pretty fast."

Regina and Emma sat at the table across the kitchen once more, Regina searching through her books while Emma scoured the internet on her phone for any possible ideas from random literature or lore. Regina had found the idea to be positively stupid, but Emma had argued that it wasn't really *that* stupid considering all of *their* stories had been written down by someone in this realm, even if they were terribly skewed. So, it was likely that someone had written about magic or magical laws in a way that was relevant to those of the Enchanted Forest. That, and Emma had just gotten tired of pretending like she could read half of the weird crap in Regina's strange books.

The two adult women frequently glanced up at one another, sharing a small smile or a smirk at the antics they heard behind them as Henry showed Regina's younger self the various kitchen tools that existed in this realm. It had been quite hilarious to hear the way R 'ooed' and 'awed' over the microwave as it popped a bag of popcorn, and the way she had practically climbed inside the oven to inspect it, because she did not understand how it operated without a fire.

Emma had actually had to plug her nose and cup a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing when R had actually screamed when Henry turned on the mixer just to show her how it worked. The sound had apparently startled

her, and as much as Emma wanted to laugh, Regina had kicked the ever-loving hell out of her shin under the table, despite the fact that the brunette was smiling as if she wanted to laugh as well.

A moment later, the toaster finished its job, and fresh toast popped up quickly, startling R. She jumped back with a squeak of surprise, a few bread crumbs having flown into her face. She wiped quickly at her face as she stared at the toast, bewildered. Her expression then quickly changed to awe and excitement as she launched forward to grab the toast, but Henry grabbed her wrist again and stopped her.

He barely managed to get his words out through his laughter as he said, "Wait, wait. You have to let it cool, R."

"Oh, very well, yes," R said, a little breathless with her excitement. "I apologize for my impatience. It is simply rather exhilarating, I suppose."

Emma's entire face was red as she pretended to still be paying attention to the open webpages on her phone, but was really just desperately trying not to explode into laughter under Regina's glaring scrutiny. A moment later, though, she couldn't hold it in any longer.

Henry told R it was okay to take the toast, which of course she quickly did. "See?" Henry said, smiling at the teen. "You made toast!"

R giggled and then took a small bite, chewed, swallowed, and squealed her excitement again before running over to the kitchen table.

"Emma!" she said happily, to which the blonde turned and looked at her.

"Yeah?" Emma choked out, her cheeks red and her throat constricted from trying not to laugh.

"I made this toast!" R cheered to her. "It is delicious, and I needed not even make a fire!"

Emma didn't even try then. She just burst into laughter, unable to hold it in any longer. R didn't even seem to care, simply giggling along with her and

eating her toast.

Once her laughing fit had passed, Emma reached out and patted the teen's arm affectionately. "Good job, R. I'm glad you like the toaster."

"Oh, I do," R said happily, beaming at Emma and leaning into the blonde's touch. "Might I try other devices?"

Emma smiled and patted her arm again. "Sure you can," she told her. "Just take Henry with you, and be careful."

Regina watched this exchange with one brow arched so high that it was practically disappearing into her hairline. Emma never touched her in such a way, and yet here she was patting R's back and smiling at her as if she was the most adorable thing in the world. And was her younger self actually *leaning* into Emma's touch?

Interesting.

"Thank you," R said sweetly, before reaching out to tentatively place a hand on Emma's shoulder and squeeze, which quickly had Regina's other brow shooting up.

R then followed Henry back out of the kitchen, leaving Regina to stare questioningly at Emma.

"What?" Emma blurted after a moment. She could no longer handle being the central focus of Regina's intense stare. The silence and the stare were eating her alive.

"What was that?" Regina finally asked, keeping her gaze latched onto Emma's.

Brows furrowing in confusion, Emma returned Regina's questioning gaze. "What was *what*?"

"*That*," Regina said again, cocking her head in the direction of the living room.

"Yeah," Emma drawled, smacking her lips and huffing out a breath, "you're going to have to be a little more specific than that, Regina. I may have magic, but I'm not a mind reader."

Regina merely stared at her for a long moment before letting out a sigh, rolling her eyes, and pulling the nearest book toward her once more. "Nothing, dear. Nevermind."

"Oh no, no, no," Emma said, shaking her head. "You can't just start something like that and then not tell me what you meant."

"Considering the fact that I just did," Regina drawled as she dropped her gaze to the book, "I would argue that I actually *can*."

"Very funny," Emma snapped, mock laughing. "But seriously, what were you talking about? Tell me."

Regina pursed her lips, keeping her eyes fixed on the page in front of her, and simply replied with a quick, "No."

"Regina, seriously, come on," Emma deadpanned. "Stop being like that, and just tell me."

"No," Regina repeated, her expression stoic despite the fact that she was smiling internally. She had always enjoyed watching the Savior squirm. It was entirely too entertaining how quickly Emma Swan could transform from an adult to a five-year-old whining child. Then again, Regina firmly believed that moments in which Emma acted fully as an adult were few and far between.

"Fine," Emma bit out after a minute, jerking her own phone toward her once more. "Didn't want to know anyway." She opened the webpage she had been reading earlier about magical time travel in modern literature. She only managed to read a total of eleven words (*Time-travel devices have been used in fiction to initiate a...*) before she let out a loud, agitated sigh and lowered her phone again. She glared at Regina as she said, "Regina, just freaking tell me. You're being childish."

Regina snorted with laughter at that, but never moved her gaze from her book. "Says the woman who is currently whining like a toddler."

"Only because you are pointlessly withholding information," Emma argued, cheeks a fresh shade of pink thanks to the truth in Regina's mocking statement.

Regina huffed out a breath and rolled her eyes at the blonde again as she finally looked up from her book. "I am not 'withholding information', Miss Swan," she replied, her tone sharp and exasperated. "You are making a big deal of nothing."

"If it's nothing, then you could just tell me," Emma argued, and Regina glared at her.

"It was a momentary curiosity," Regina told her, "and now it has passed. I haven't stolen your pacifier, Emma. I simply changed my mind, so stop whining and let it go."

Emma crossed her arms over her chest and grumbled to herself as Regina went back to her book. After a long moment of silence, Emma said, "You know, you should take a page out of your younger self's book."

Regina's brow lifted, but she didn't look up. "Meaning?"

"Meaning R is really nice and sweet," Emma told her.

Regina looked up then, and with a teasing smile on her face, she asked, "What? You don't think that *I'm* nice and sweet?"

Emma tried not to smile, but she couldn't help it. So, she just chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Are you sure we can't just keep R and send *you* back?" she teased.

"Oh come now, dear," Regina replied easily, smirking. "I think we both know that the good citizens of Storybrooke would miss me far too much. Your mother would surely mourn my absence endlessly."

Emma snorted with laughter. "Oh please, she's practically obsessed with the younger version of you," she told the brunette. "Seriously, I'm surprised that there's not like a shrine hidden in her closet. A bust of your head made entirely from recycled goods and twigs with poetry written on the walls to celebrate the *good, kind, pure, and lovely, lovely, LOVELY girl that saved me from that horse and taught me about true love!*"

Regina burst into loud laughter at that, unable to hold it in any longer. As much as it had always pained her to think about that time in her life, especially where Snow was concerned, Regina found her heart wonderfully light as she listened to Emma do a shockingly uncanny impression of her mother. It sapped the tension right out of such a heavy memory, and made it easier to digest.

Emma laughed with her, her shoulders shaking as she gasped for air between laughs. When the melody of their combined laughter died down, she smiled at Regina and said, "No, but seriously, though. For what it's worth, you *would* be missed."

"Henry," Regina replied gently, nodding her agreement, but was surprised when Emma shook her head.

"No," Emma told her, to which Regina began to protest, so the blonde quickly backtracked. "No, I mean, yes Henry, but I meant not *just* Henry." She cleared her throat awkwardly as her cheeks flushed a soft pink. "Henry isn't the only one."

Regina simply gaped at Emma for a long moment, her lips slightly parted and a wonderful ache building in her chest. Before she could respond, though, Emma cleared her throat roughly again, motioned toward the book in front of Regina, and asked, "So, have you found anything yet?"

***Chapter 6*: Chapter 6**

A/N: For those wondering or requesting, the chapters will not be any longer. They will all range between 1500 and 2200 words. This is because, as I stated in my Author's Note in chapter one, this story is written in short bursts/drabbles on tumblr by request. When I collect two or three drabbles, I compile them into one of these chapters and post it here. You would be waiting quite some time for updates any longer than these, as I cannot work on my tumblr prompts as often as I would like to. I hope that explains it for any of you wondering, and I hope you will all still enjoy the story as is. Please take care, and enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Six

Regina let Emma off the hook by dropping her gaze back to the book in front of her. She let out a soft sigh as the blonde's words filtered through her mind over and over, and Regina knew that she would be toiling over them for days to come. That was simply the way of her mind.

She had never been able to let anything go, always overanalyzing.

"I thought I had," she said after a moment, "but it turned out to be nothing more than what I already knew."

"Yeah?" Emma asked, rising out of her chair and walking around the table to drop into the one beside Regina. She reached out for the book in front of the brunette. "Let me see."

"I thought you couldn't read any of this 'witchy crap'?" Regina asked, brow arched, and a smirk teasing at her lips as she stared pointedly at the woman now in closer proximity.

Emma just rolled her eyes at Regina's repetition of her own words. "I stand by that," Emma told her, laughing. "I still can't, but maybe I just want to

feel like I'm contributing more than steady strokes to your ego by not knowing anything."

Regina's smirk grew into a smile, and Emma rolled her eyes again. "Just give me the book, woman," she huffed. She didn't actually wait for Regina to do so, though, before she lunged forward and snatched the tome from between the brunette's hands.

"Suit yourself," Regina said, as Emma glanced over the page that was open.

Emma gaped at the page, seeing nothing but symbols that equated to absolutely nothing in her mind. "Yeah," she drawled after a moment. "I got nothin'."

"Now, was that waste of time necessary?" Regina teased, and before Emma could stop herself, she leaned over and nudged Regina's side with her elbow.

"You're such an ass," the blonde laughed out, and Regina echoed her laughter. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and it was as if both women suddenly realized that they were acting like...well, like friends. *Real* friends.

Real friends who tease one another with no malice in their words, with no ill intent. Real friends who poke one another's buttons and then soothe the sting. Real friends who have few physical barriers and simply enjoy being in one another's space. Real friends that Regina and Emma had never once been with one another before.

They had always had a strange sort of connection, an understanding that evolved into mutual respect at times. That understanding had further evolved after the events of Neverland. It was as if something that had once existed as a barrier between them had been steadily beaten and broken down as they fought for the life of their son, until that barrier had completely crumbled.

Neither acknowledged it aloud, but since their days in the jungle, something had changed between them. Their constant jabs at one another softened and

grew affectionate. They sought one another out for opinions and advice where mothering their son was concerned and then eventually, for even more. They grew to truly care without even realizing it.

Until, perhaps, this moment.

They scooted apart from one another quickly as if burned by the sudden realization that they were being cute and friendly with one another. "Yes, well," Regina said, clearing her throat, "they don't call me evil for nothing."

"They don't call you evil at all anymore," Emma told her, offering the woman a sincere smile.

Regina turned to look at her once more, a deadpan stare that made Emma bite into her bottom lip. "Yeah, okay," the blonde said, "so *some* people still call you evil, but nobody that matters. The people that care about you would never call you that, because it's not true."

"It's not?" Regina challenged.

"No," Emma told her firmly and with absolute conviction. "That's not who you are anymore."

Regina leaned her head on her fist as she stared at the blonde beside her. "And who is it that you think I am, Miss Swan?"

"Well, I think that *I* am Emma, so stick with that," Emma teased, grinning at the brunette, "and I think that *you* are just you, and *maybe...*" She grinned mischievously, hesitating before saying, "Maybe you're just a little more like R than you like to admit."

Regina snorted at that, putting up a front despite the fact that her heart had clenched at Emma's words. "Maybe *you're* delusional, dear."

Emma just shook her head and smiled. "Maybe I'm not."

They held each other's gazes for a long moment, before Regina quietly said, "Maybe we should get back to work."

Emma blinked rapidly. "Right, uh...so, you wanna read this to me?"

Regina grabbed the book again and looked down at the page. "Very well."

"That's seriously it?" Emma asked. "That entire page of squiggles and symbols, and all it friggin' says is 'Time Ripples are of unknown origin and may only be accessed by sorcerers of considerable power'?"

"No, of course not, dear," Regina told her, smirking. "If you recall, it also mentioned that time ripples were considered unstable and dangerous."

"Right, so, basically," Emma chimed in again, "that whole page is pointless, because even before I knew that magic actually existed, if someone asked me about a ripple in time, I could've easily made up those rules about it just off the top of my head with nothing but a little imagination and some damn common sense."

Regina pursed her lips as she stared down at the page in disappointment. "Indeed," she agreed, nodding absentmindedly.

"Also," Emma continued, "I really don't feel comfortable with the whole 'unstable and dangerous' thing. I don't want to send R back through something described as 'unstable and dangerous'."

"Well, she came through one well enough," Regina replied, shrugging a shoulder.

"So we *think*," Emma said. "How do we even know she was meant to end up here? Maybe she was supposed to go to a totally different time. Or maybe it worked perfectly the way it was supposed to that *one* time, but that doesn't change the fact that the *next* time, it could be all unstable and dangerous. I mean, how unstable and dangerous are we talking, here?"

"Emma," Regina said, closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips to her temple.

"Huh?" Emma asked, snapping out of her rapid ramble.

"*Stop* saying 'unstable and dangerous'," Regina told her, and Emma just stared at her. Regina opened her eyes a moment later and locked gazes with the blonde. "Those two words don't even sound like words anymore after that."

Emma chuckled at that. "Sorry," she laughed out. "I do that all the time. 'Milk' is a big one. You only have to say that word like twice in the span of a few seconds and it stops sounding like a real word."

"Yes, well, unless milk has suddenly become a magical object of grand importance or a nefarious new foe," Regina responded, "it is of absolutely no significance."

A long, hissing sigh emitted from Emma's throat as the blonde rolled her eyes at Regina's snarky reply. "You seriously need to learn to chill," Emma told her.

"I am incredibly chill, dear," Regina replied, arching a brow at the other woman.

"Sure you are," Emma deadpanned. "So, what should we do then, because I'm pretty sure you've already looked through all these books?" The blonde glanced up at the sliding door in the kitchen that led into the backyard. The sky was darkening outside, strips of orange and red visible over the top of Regina's privacy fence. "And it's gonna be dark soon."

"I suppose we are simply going to have to accept the fact that R is not going home," Regina told her, sighing. "Not tonight anyway."

"Sweet," Emma said happily, a smile bursting across her lips.

At Regina's confused and somewhat stern expression, the blonde quickly schooled her features, cleared her throat, and said, "I mean, that's not so bad. As long as we keep her safe and don't tell her any of the evil-queen stuff, everything should be fine, right?"

Regina's gaze dropped to the table so that Emma could only just make out the worried look in chocolate eyes as the brunette whispered, "I hope so."

Emma reached out and patted Regina's shoulder awkwardly. "Hey," she said, and waited for Regina to look up at her, all stormy dark eyes and silent insecurity. Emma could read those eyes better than any book. When Regina looked at her again, Emma smiled softly at her and said, "It *will* be fine."

They stared at one another for a long moment, a strange sort of tension developing between them until the moment was suddenly interrupted by the very loud rumbling of Emma's stomach.

Regina chuckled at the blonde. "Hungry, Miss Swan?"

Emma rubbed a hand over her stomach as she joined in Regina's gentle laughter. "Apparently so," she said. She then arched a brow at the woman beside her and asked, "Wanna do something about it?"

"Why can *you* not do something about it?" Regina challenged playfully. "I am a queen, not a cook."

Emma snorted at that one. "Yeah, but you're also a queen who *can* cook... like *really* well."

"And?"

"I'm not asking you to cook for me or anything," Emma said quickly, and Regina nearly laughed out loud.

"Oh? You're not?" Regina asked her before biting her lip to keep from laughing.

"No way, I'm just saying that *Henry* needs a good dinner," Emma explained, "a *home-cooked* dinner."

"Uh huh," Regina hummed, nodding.

"And so does R," Emma threw in. "You can't just let them starve, you know."

"I never intended to," Regina replied, smirking. She was going to make Emma grovel simply because it was entertaining.

"Well good," Emma said, twiddling her thumbs as she kept her hands clasped together on the table. "So, since you're going to be cooking anyway, and I'm already here and everything..."

Regina merely offered her a blank stare. "Yes...?"

"Well, I just figured it wouldn't be a big deal if I stayed..." Emma trailed off before adding, "...for dinner."

"I thought you weren't asking me to cook for you," Regina said, trying her best not to grin and give it away that she had always intended to ask Emma to stay for dinner. Regina had always enjoyed cooking, and no one, not even Henry, praised her cooking more than Emma Swan did.

"I'm not," Emma said quickly. She then offered Regina a wide smile that Regina thought made the blonde look like a mischievous child. "I asked you to cook for *Henry and R*. I would just benefit from it, too."

"Ah," Regina said, allowing that smile to slip slowly across her lips. "I see. In that case, I suppose it is fine for you to stay for dinner."

"Yeah?" Emma asked excitedly.

"Yes," Regina answered, "but you are doing the dishes afterward."

Emma's lip curled in disgust. She hated doing the dishes, but she would take it in exchange for Regina's cooking. "Deal."

***Chapter 7*: Chapter 7**

Chapter Seven

Emma's lip curled in disgust as she grabbed Henry's plate with soapy hands and began to scrub it clean of the remnants of his dinner. "Ugh, god, Regina," she said, her face completely scrunched, "your son is disgusting."

Regina chuckled at that. "Oh, so he's *my* son when he's being disgusting, but he is *our* son when he isn't?"

"Well yeah, duh," Emma teased, glancing over her shoulder to grin at the woman moving around behind her.

Regina was busy putting away the dishes and cookware that Emma had already washed. She rolled her eyes at Emma's goofy grin. "I see," Regina said. "In that case, I move that he be *your* son when he is being irritating."

"No way," Emma laughed out. "That's not fair at all."

"How is that not fair?" Regina challenged.

Emma just pinned her with a stare over her shoulder. "Because the kid is irritating all the time," she answered, sticking her tongue out at the brunette.

Regina mock-gasped, teasing the blonde. "How dare you speak about our darling son in such a way!" she joked, and Emma's stomach flipped pleasantly. It always surprised her when Regina loosened up a bit and played along with her; surprised and *delighted*.

"I love the kid to death," Emma laughed out, "but you know it's true."

"I blame it on bad genes," Regina countered, smirking, and Emma couldn't even be offended. She just cracked up, turned, and swatted Regina's side with the nearest towel.

Regina yelped and jumped out of the way, letting out a soft giggle that had both women instantly freezing and staring at one another. Regina swallowed the laughter as it died in her mouth. She then cleared her throat, turned away from the blonde with a faint blush adorning her cheeks, and asked, "So, what disgusting thing were you referring to?"

Emma stood gaping at Regina for a moment before shaking her head and turning back toward the sink to finish the dishes. "This barbecue sauce obsession he has. He puts it on *everything*. It's gross."

Regina chuckled. "You don't like barbecue sauce?"

"Regina, you made SPAGHETTI!" Emma said, turning to bug her eyes out at the brunette. "You made pasta, and he *still* smothered it in barbecue sauce, on TOP of the spaghetti sauce. You seriously don't find that disgusting?"

Regina's nose scrunched as she nodded. "Indeed I do," she admitted, and Emma laughed. "I'm hoping it's a strange food phase that will soon lose its appeal."

"God, me too," Emma agreed. "He put it on his toast the other day, and I legitimately gagged."

Regina almost gagged at the mere *thought* of barbecue sauce on toast. "Perhaps we should branch out, buy new foods, and try to get him to try new things?"

"I think he'll probably just put barbecue sauce on all the new things," Emma told her, chuckling.

"Most likely," Regina agreed, sighing.

"Pardon my intrusion," said a voice from behind the two women. Both Regina and Emma turned to see R hovering in the open doorway of the kitchen, her hands clasped gently in front of her body and her expression unsure.

"It's fine, dear," Regina told her younger self. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, of course," R answered, "but it appears that Henry has fallen asleep, and I..."

"Got lonely?" Emma asked, leaning against the sink and smiling at the teenager.

R's cheeks flushed a beautiful shade of crimson as she nodded subtly.

"Well, that's understandable," Emma told her. "Henry always passes out when he's full. We should've warned you about that. Sorry."

"There is no need to apologize," R said kindly. "He is quite adorable when he sleeps."

Both Regina and Emma grinned at that. R then went on to say, "It seems you are otherwise engaged, though, and I noticed that you have private land." She pointed toward the opposite wall where a door led to the fenced-in backyard. "I was wondering if I might be permitted to go outside."

Regina's heart ached in her chest at the sheer loneliness decorating her younger self's voice. She took a step forward and somewhat awkwardly patted the teenager on the shoulder. "Of course you can. Just don't leave the yard."

"Very well," R answered, offering her future self a soft smile. "Thank you, and thank you again for the meal. It was quite wonderful."

"You are most welcome," Regina replied, "but you have already thanked me, so there is no need to thank me again." She then turned and saw Emma watching the two of them, a huge smile decorating the blonde's face. Regina's own cheeks flushed then, and she quickly said, "I am going to go and coax Henry up to his room."

"Okay," Emma said with a nod. "I'm just gonna finish these dishes, and then I'll probably head out before too long."

Regina said nothing, simply nodding and turning to leave the room. R stared at Emma a moment longer and Emma just smiled at her, finding the girl incredibly sweet and so damn kind that it was almost unreal. "You okay?" the blonde asked after a moment, and R instantly nodded.

"Yes, thank you," the teen replied quickly. "My apologies for staring." She then rocketed toward the door like her pants were on fire and shot out into the yard. Emma just chuckled and went back to the dishes.

Emma finished up the last two dishes. She dried them off and placed them in the proper cabinets before leaning against the counter and letting out a sigh. She reached up to pull her hair from the wadded knot at the base of her neck that she had bunched it up into before doing the dishes. It cascaded around her shoulders, the familiar scent of her shampoo drifting up to her nose as it fell.

A yawn escaped her as she stretched out her limbs, glancing around Regina's kitchen. The brunette had yet to return from putting Henry to bed, so Emma wasn't quite sure what to do. She didn't want to just slip out without saying goodbye, but she also didn't want to just be standing in the woman's kitchen doing nothing when Regina returned. Her gaze scanned over the large room, and that's when something caught her eye; or rather, *someone*.

Emma moved over to the window and looked out into the backyard. It was dark outside, but the small glass-orb lights dotted throughout Regina's extensive garden ignited the yard with a soft, beautiful glow. Emma smiled tenderly at sight of the teenager seated in the grass in the middle of the yard, R's neck craned back as she looked up at the night sky.

The girl seemed completely lost in the moment as Emma watched her. A moment later, Emma decided to join her, stepping quietly through the door and into the backyard. The night air was cool but not unbearable as she made her way over, her feet making soft swishing sounds in the short grass.

R jumped a bit when Emma dropped down beside her, having been so lost in thought that she hadn't heard the woman approaching. She turned to see

Emma smiling softly at her, and it made her stomach flip pleasantly. She ducked her head a bit as she returned the smile, and Emma chuckled softly.

"Hey," Emma said quietly, bumping the girl's shoulder with her own. "You like stargazing?"

"Yes," R answered in a whisper. "Do you?"

"Oh yeah," Emma told her, grinning. She then lay fully down in the grass, her blonde hair fanning out around her. She waited for R to join her, but the girl simply continued to stare back at her. Emma finally just laughed and tugged on the back of R's top. "Lay down."

R's back met the grass gently as she heeded Emma's command and settled into the space beside the blonde. They lay together in silence, just staring up at the dark sky together, speckled with shining white balls of fire. R was surprised by how truly comfortable she felt lying next to this woman she had only just met. It was a lovely feeling.

"You're homesick," Emma whispered after a long moment. She hadn't voiced it as a question. It was simply that she seemed to know and understand.

"Yes," R admitted quietly. "This land is lovely, but it is not home."

"I get that," Emma told her. "I spent a lot of years looking for home. Storybrooke is it for me, but I get that it isn't for you."

"Looking for home?" R inquired, not quite understanding the blonde's words.

"Yeah," Emma answered, her breath coming out in a puff of white fog. "I was a foster kid."

R turned her head, and Emma saw nothing but confusion in the girl's expression. She didn't understand what the term "foster" meant. Emma just chuckled and said, "Oh, right, you have no idea what that is. Um, it just means that I was an orphan."

"Oh," R whispered, the words stinging on her flesh. "My apologies."

Emma shook her head. "No need, kid. It's just part of my past. We all have one, you know?"

"Indeed," R agreed, turning back to stare up at the twinkling stars.

"Sometimes, I used to lie down outside like this when I was kid," Emma said after a long moment, her tone so wistful that it ached in R's chest, "and I would imagine that my parents were up there somewhere, looking down on me. That maybe they couldn't be with me and so they watched over me from up there. It was ridiculous, but it helped."

R's throat felt tight and scratchy. She swallowed thickly to rid herself of the sensation, but it remained. She didn't know what to say, but she felt like she should say something; perhaps something soothing, but what would soothe? How could she express that she related, but in an entirely different way?

After several moments spent toiling over how best to express herself, R whispered, "It is not ridiculous, Emma. I, too, have found solace in the stars, though I must say that while the view here is lovely, it hardly compares to that of home."

"Yeah?" Emma asked. She had been in the Enchanted Forest before, but had never actually taken the chance to look the hell around and absorb the place. The stars hadn't even occurred to her, but thinking back on it now—all that open land and endless sky. She had no doubt that it was incredible.

"Oh yes," R replied quietly. "It is quite breathtaking. I always have to sneak from my home, though, if I am to gaze at the stars. It is a risk I take frequently, because the sight brings me such peace."

"Why do you need it?" Emma asked her then, and R turned to look her, cheek resting against soft blades of grass.

"Why do I need what?" R questioned.

Emma turned and smiled at her. "The peace."

"Oh," R whispered, her stomach dropping. She turned to gaze back up at the sky as she whispered her answer so quietly that Emma had to scoot a little closer to hear it. "My...my mother..." R hesitated for a moment, her eyes clenching closed, and then she took a breath and let it out in a gentle sigh. "Many things," she said simply after a moment, and those two words felt so heavy that Emma struggled to breathe just hearing them.

Neither of them said another word, simply resting in the quiet understanding that they could offer one another, and then Emma felt R's fingers slip over her own where their hands rested in the grass between their bodies. She let the girl hold her hand, understanding that R needed some kind of connection in that moment. Emma squeezed R's hand and hoped that it soothed the teenager, and she thought of Regina, *this* world's Regina, realizing that it was this girl that Emma had seen in chocolate depths all those times when Regina had dropped her guard and her eyes had grown full and heavy. It was R...hidden deep inside, but very much present.

Some feet away from them and standing just inside the open door frame of the kitchen that led into the backyard stood the very woman Emma thought of. Regina's eyes burned as she listened to the comfortable exchange between Emma and R, and when she watched the Savior's fingers tangle together with those of her younger self, a tear slipped down Regina's cheek and fell away from her. A lump formed in her throat even as her heart swelled to the point of bursting.

***Chapter 8*: Chapter 8**

Chapter Eight

The silence seemed only to grow, enveloping them in an ever-expanding orb of serenity as they lay beneath the cold sky, fingers tangled together and breath escaping in evanescent clouds. Every few seconds, Emma felt R squeeze tightly around her hand and then relax again. She didn't look at the teen, because she didn't want R to feel exposed, but Emma could tell by those gentle and frequent pulses of grip that R was crying.

She felt like R was deliberately trying to hold in her cries, as she hadn't heard a peep—not a gasp or a sob or any other indication.

Without turning to look at the girl, Emma quietly whispered to her. The words escaped in a white fog and then died in the air as it grew colder and thinner around them. "It's okay to cry."

She heard something then. The grass rustled as R's head turned, and then Emma felt eyes on her. She turned to look back at R and offered her a gentle smile despite the fact that the sparkling tracks on the girl's cheeks felt like fissures in Emma's heart.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Emma asked quietly.

She was surprised when instead of words, R answered by touching her. Fingers skated over her cheek and nose, and then R whispered, "I am simply pleased to know that it gets better. I will meet you soon, in *my* time."

Emma's brows furrowed. R had been crying tears of joy? Because it...gets better. Emma swallowed thickly as bile rose to her throat. Knowing what she knew of Regina's past, Emma felt sick to her stomach at the hopeful look in this girl's eyes, and she was completely shocked when a rage unlike any she had felt in a long time began to brew and bubble deep in her gut. In that moment, looking into those innocent eyes begging her for a spark of

hope, Emma wanted to rip the entire world apart and put it back together so that this precious person never felt any pain.

At the confused expression on Emma's face, R giggled and said, "I apologize. I assumed that given Henry's age..."

"He's almost fourteen," Emma whispered breathlessly, the pieces beginning to fit together so that she understood what R was saying.

R smiled a little more brightly at the news, her tears only making her eyes all the more beautiful. "That would have given me eighteen years during the time of his birth if I have thirty-two in this time, which means that you and I shall meet quite soon, yes?"

Emma's eyes stung horribly and she blinked rapidly to try to quell the urge to cry. Before she could answer, though, R popped out another excited question.

"How did we meet?" Her cheeks flushed sweetly in the moonlight then as she lowered her voice to a whisper and asked, "Did you think I was beautiful when you first saw me?"

Emma's throat felt tight and scratchy as she tried to think of how to reply, but then she just decided that it was probably best to tell the truth. She let out a staggered sigh as she whispered, "Yes, I thought you were beautiful." R squeezed her hand tightly and a new smile erupted on her face when Emma went on to say, "You *are* beautiful."

R scooted a little closer to Emma then, and the blonde's heart began to race. She needed to pull away. It wasn't a good idea to let R get attached to her or to even let her think that there was something between them when there wasn't. It was a mistake not to have made it clear to her that she and Regina were not together and never had been. They needed to explain everything to her, and simply tell her the truth so that R wasn't hoping for something that would never happen.

But then...

"Were you my first kiss, Emma?"

"I...uh, well I...You see...You and-" Emma stuttered through the beginnings of several thoughts, because for some reason, the truths that had so willingly and readily been on the tip of her tongue just a moment ago now violently protested being put to voice. What was worse was that she didn't even really *know* the truth other than the fact that no, she had not been Regina's first kiss. She didn't know who *was*, though. She assumed it was Daniel, but it wasn't like Regina had ever sat her down for some hot chocolate, hair braiding, and girl talk and spilled the beans about her first kiss.

And just saying no? That seemed even worse. If she had a story to add to it, a way to lessen the blow, a way to explain, then maybe it wouldn't be so terrible. But she didn't. She didn't have a story to tell. Any story would be a lie, and if she was willing to lie about *that* then why not just tell R that she *was* her first kiss? A lie was a lie, right?

Emma had never made a habit of lying, but in this one moment, it seemed like the most attractive thing in the world.

She was aware that she shouldn't, though. Lying wouldn't help anyone, and neither would simply omitting the facts. It would only make things more complicated, maybe even harder, when everything came to light; *if* everything came to light. Wouldn't it?

She sucked in a sharp breath, preparing to let this smiling, hopeful girl down with a simple two-letter word that somehow had the power to break hearts and bodies and entire worlds. When she opened her mouth to speak, though, all that came out was a puff of air that sounded a lot like, "Yes."

R's smile rivaled the brilliance of the full glowing moon as soon as that single word slipped through Emma's lips, and Emma's heart jumped pleasantly before sinking into the acidic pit of her stomach and burning torturously. What the hell had she just done?

R scooted even closer to Emma then, so close that their noses were nearly bumping and Emma could feel the heat of the teen's breath against her cheeks and chin. "I knew it," the girl whispered happily, and Emma's heart only burned hotter, more painfully.

"R," Emma began, but R let out a soft sigh and interrupted.

"Please," the girl said quietly, "in this moment, might you address me by my true name?"

Emma closed her eyes tightly and took a deep, steadying breath. She needed to find a way out of this. She needed to put some distance between herself and R. She needed to figure things out. She needed to think about what she'd just done and figure out how to rectify it. She needed so many things in that moment.

Emma nodded, her eyes still closed, and then she felt R's breath on her lips. Emma's eyes shot open and her hand jolted up between them and pressed gently against R's lips to keep the girl from kissing her. Emma sat up so fast that it made her head spin, not wanting to see the look of confusion or shock or downright disappointment that was undoubtedly marring R's precious features.

"R," she croaked out before clearing her throat and correcting herself. "*Regina*...I can't. I'm sorry. Please...try to understand." Without waiting for a response or even looking back at the teen because Emma didn't think she could bear it, the blonde jumped to her feet and took off toward the house, her eyes fixed on the ground all the way.

Emma shot through the back door and into the mansion's kitchen. She was intent on getting to the foyer, getting her keys, and getting the hell out of there as quickly as possible because her skin was positively crawling. What she had just done and what it had nearly led to were already haunting her as if they were dusty mistakes dancing in the taunting memories of her past and never letting her rest. Those always seemed to hurt the worst.

She didn't understand why she was so affected, but she was.

If she thought on it, Emma knew it was because of Regina—*this* world's Regina. Maybe she didn't know *all* the reasons why or even why those reasons seemed to get so far under her skin that she could feel them in her blood, but she definitely knew *that* much.

It was the difference, she thought. It was the startling contrast between the hope in R's eyes and the haunt in Regina's. It was the fact that the former had fizzled out and no longer danced in chocolate depths. It was the fact that the latter existed at all.

It was the fact that Emma had now been the cause of both looks in some small or grand way at a given point.

She raced through the kitchen, not even paying attention to anything around her, but then Emma's blood ran cold at the sound of a voice she really did not want to hear in that moment.

"You lied to her."

Emma skidded to a stop, her hand coming up to grip onto the edge of the kitchen island. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and letting that horrible sinking feeling spread throughout her entire body. She couldn't dismantle it. It seemed to have infiltrated her entire system in that moment.

And then she turned around.

The former queen was pressed against the cabinets to the immediate right of the back door. That's why Emma hadn't seen her when she had shot into the kitchen. Regina must have been watching her interaction with R. She must have heard...everything.

Regina's expression was hard to read, which surprised Emma. She expected anger. She expected rage. She expected so many things, but she never expected such gentle conflict—only a slight edge of confusion dancing in those deep, dark eyes. She never expected Regina to look at her this way, in the wake of a lie that had the power to break a heart; to look at her as if that lie, instead, had the power to heal one.

"Yeah," Emma choked out. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" Regina asked, her voice scratchy and quiet, and Emma wondered if the brunette had been crying.

"Because I shouldn't have," Emma answered, and Regina shook her head in response.

Regina's heart felt as if it was expanding to fill her entire body as she pushed off the counter and moved closer to Emma. "No," she whispered, looking deeply into those emerald eyes. "Why did you lie...about my first kiss?"

Emma's pulse became rapid and shallow as Regina moved so close to her that the woman's familiar scent seeped into her and made her shiver. "I don't know," she croaked, honestly. Her eyes burned intensely, and Emma hated that she had this ridiculous urge to sob. "She just...you..."

Emma let out of a hard huff of air as she felt Regina's hand settle around her forearm. She closed her eyes and quietly whispered. "She just looked so hopeful. I couldn't be the person that took that from her. I couldn't...I'm sorry."

"Emma," Regina whispered, her fingers tightening around the blonde's arm. Regina's own eyes burned at the sincerity in Emma's words. "Look at me."

Emma took several breaths before she finally opened her eyes. She felt breathless and weightless when chocolate eyes shined at her, and Regina's lips parted to quietly say, "Thank you."

***Chapter 9*: Chapter 9**

Chapter Nine

Emma took several breaths before she finally opened her eyes. She felt breathless and weightless when chocolate eyes shined at her, and Regina's lips parted to quietly say, "Thank you."

Emma gasped softly and searched Regina's eyes. "You're not mad?"

Regina smiled slowly, almost painfully it seemed, at her. "How can I be?" she asked, her voice so soft that Emma barely detected the gentle cracks in its melody.

"Because I lied," Emma whispered.

"But you lied to protect m—to protect *her*," Regina replied with a gentle sigh.

Emma smiled, her eyes watery. "She *is* you, Regina. So, it was to protect *you*."

Regina dropped her gaze then, her eyes devouring the floor, and Emma felt her heart clench in her chest. "Did I say something wrong?" the blonde asked.

Regina's head shook from side to side. Her hand remained wrapped around Emma's forearm, and when she finally looked up, her glossy eyes sucked the breath right out of Emma's lungs. "No," the brunette whispered. "You said exactly the right thing."

Emma's hand shot out of its own accord and her thumb caught Regina's first tear as it crested her eyelid and fell. She wiped it away and chuckled softly. "What, no cutting remark about that being a first?" she asked quietly.

Regina laughed in a wet whisper, a watery smile slipping across her elegant features.

They took one tiny step toward one another, neither even realizing that the other had moved. Their gazes never wavered as they took in one another, both emerald and chocolate blown wide and dancing with uncertainty and yearning.

"Oh."

Regina and Emma jerked away from one another at the sudden sound of R's voice. The teen stood just inside the door of the kitchen, having just come in from the back yard. Her eyes were bloodshot and her cheeks were streaked with dampness that glistened in the kitchen lights, evidence that she had been crying. Seeing as much made Emma want to crawl in a hole and disappear.

Before Emma or Regina could utter a word, R lowered her head and bit out a quick, "Apologies," before zipping right by them and toward the living room.

"Fuck," Emma muttered, her chest aching terribly as she watched her go. "I did this."

"I will talk to her," Regina said quietly, but Emma quickly put up a hand to stop her.

"I should do it," the blonde said, sighing. "I shouldn't have tried to run."

"She isn't your responsibility," Regina replied, trying to make Emma feel better in some small way.

"Whose responsibility is she then?" Emma asked, turning to look at the brunette. "Yours? It doesn't have to be that way. She came out of that ripple right as I was passing by. I don't think that was coincidence, do you?"

Regina looked away from the blonde as she whispered, "No."

Emma nodded. "So maybe she's both our responsibility. Either way, I'm the one who hurt her feelings. I should be the one to talk to her."

"Very well," Regina answered after a moment.

Emma sniffed as she swiped quickly at her eyes. She moved to the edge of the kitchen, just inside the frame that led into the foyer. She turned back and chuckled softly as she locked gazes with Regina. "You can eavesdrop again if you want."

Regina's cheeks burned as they shaded a deep crimson. "Well," she said, clearing her throat, "*it is my house.*"

Emma just grinned before turning and heading out of the kitchen and toward the living room.

Emma found R seated on the large couch in the living room, her arms crossed over her chest and her head bowed down against them.

"Hey," Emma greeted quietly. When R didn't look up or answer, the blonde swallowed thickly and tried again. "Can I sit with you?"

R didn't say anything for a long time, but then she whispered, "Yes."

Emma slowly made her way around to the front of the couch, and just before she sat down, she glanced up to see Regina standing quietly some distance away from them, just watching. Emma smiled at her, a small smile, a sad one, and then she dropped onto the couch beside R.

"You're mad at me," Emma whispered after a long moment.

R simply shook her head back and forth, just as the elder version of her had done in the kitchen earlier.

Emma sighed. "Upset? Sad?"

R didn't shake her head to that one. She merely shrugged one shoulder without looking up, and that was how Emma determined that she had

guessed correctly. Before the blonde could reply, though, R suddenly turned and looked at her, tears streaking down her cheeks, and asked, "Why did you not wish to kiss me?"

Emma sighed heavily again and swiped a hand down her face. She scratched at the back of her neck as she struggled to find the right words. "Did you really want me to ruin your first kiss?"

"How could you have ruined my first kiss," R asked, "if my first is meant to be with you anyway? Would it not have been the same?"

"No," Emma answered her, shaking her head and reaching out a hand. She turned her hand over, palm up and left it open, hoping R would take it. The teen didn't move a muscle, but Emma kept her hand open anyway. "It *wouldn't* have been the same, R."

R's brows furrowed, and Emma tried to better explain. "There's a...a *magic* that happens with your first kiss, you know?"

"There was magic?" R asked, eyes widening with her surprise.

"No, no," Emma said quickly, chuckling, "not *actual* magic. I meant more like a magical moment. It's special, your first kiss."

"Special how?"

"I don't know," Emma told her honestly, shrugging. "It just *is*. You can't ever have your first kiss again. You can't recreate it, and that's what kissing you would have done. It would have recreated your first kiss, and then you never would have gotten to experience the real one."

"The one that *you* remember?" R asked, needing clarification.

Emma closed her eyes tightly as she nodded, not wanting R to see the lie in her eyes. "And trust me," she choked out, "you don't want to miss that one."

R smiled softly, her chocolate eyes sparkling with the wetness that had gathered there. "Was it wonderful?"

"Yeah, it was," Emma whispered, her chest aching in a way that she couldn't quite understand. "It really was."

"Did it take your breath away?"

Emma felt like she had pins and needles pricking along her flesh as she swallowed roughly and nodded. "Totally."

"Would you tell me about it?" R asked sweetly, and Emma nearly cried when she felt the teen's fingers finally slip between hers and squeeze.

Emma shook her head. "It should be a surprise," she told the teen, her throat tight and itching.

R's smile only grew as she finally nodded and said, "Very well." She then thoroughly surprised Emma by launching into the blonde's arms and wrapping her in a tight embrace.

Emma let out a soft, nearly silent sigh as she let her arms come up and around the girl, and when R whispered, "I look forward to it," Emma glanced to the place where Regina had been only to find that the brunette was gone. She nodded against R's shoulder and quietly said, "Me too."

"Will you be alright?" Regina asked as she sat on the edge of the bed in the guest room and looked down at her younger self.

R was tucked in tightly. Her eyes showed her uncertainty even as she nodded. "It is strange," she said quietly. "I have never spent a night away from home."

Regina smiled softly at her. "I know."

"I *am* an adult, though," R said after a moment, and Regina had to bite into her lip to keep from grinning. Despite all the time that had passed and the darkness that had grown around her and inside her since she was this age, Regina could still perfectly remember being sixteen. She had been so full of life and hope, even on her worst days, and while she had been quite an

accomplished student and rider, she had also been quite naive and timid. It was the way her mother had wanted her to be, and thus, she was. She had been both wild and reserved, both bold and shy, both longing for and yet afraid of adventure. "So, I am not afraid, if that is what you think."

Regina barely kept her expression neutral as she nodded, patted R's blanket-covered thigh, and said, "Of course not, dear." She then cleared her throat and added, "Should you need anything, though, my room is only just down the hall."

"Oh no," R said, shaking her head. "I would not wish to disturb you or Emma."

Regina didn't even want to contemplate the way her heart raced at the image that such a statement instantly caused to materialize inside her mind. She swallowed thickly as her cheeks flamed, and nodded. She had to clear her throat to manage a smooth, "Goodnight dear," before quickly rising and darting out of the room, flicking off the light and closing the door behind her.

When she stepped into the hallway, Regina was surprised to find Emma there waiting for her.

***Chapter 10*: Chapter 10**

A/N: I meant to put this in an earlier Author's Note, but I forgot, so I want to take a moment to send out a big thank you to quinnfabrai on tumblr for the incredible cover art for this little story. Enjoy this new chapter! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Ten

Regina folded her arms over her chest and took a step toward Emma, though she kept at a healthy distance from her. Her gaze darted around the hallway and then back to Emma, unsure of what exactly they were doing.

Emma simply leaned against the wall across from Regina and watched the brunette. When Regina noticed that Emma was smirking, the woman finally blurted, "What?"

Emma chuckled softly. "So, now we share a son, a mansion, *and* a room?"

"I should have known you would be eavesdropping," Regina replied, rolling her eyes and keeping her arms locked over her chest. It was almost as if she was attempting to recoil and close herself up, protect her heart from any touch, any invasion.

"To be fair," Emma said, grinning, "you did it first."

"As I said," Regina countered, "it's *my* house; thus, I have the right to eavesdrop if I choose to."

"According to R, it's *our* house," Emma laughed out, "so doesn't that mean that *I* have the right to eavesdrop, too?"

"R does not make the rules," Regina told her. "*I* do."

"Yeah, okay," Emma said, nodding, "but she kind of *is* you, so wouldn't that mean that what she says goes also?"

Regina opened her mouth to quickly retort, but then snapped it shut a second later as she realized that the blonde had a valid point. Still, Regina arched a brow a moment later in challenge and said, "No, it does not."

"Why not?" Emma asked, obviously amused. "Because you said so?"

Regina let out a sigh as she tightened her arms over her chest. "Because *that* version of me still believes in ridiculous things. No one with that sort of mentality should be making rules or decisions for others."

"Ridiculous things, huh?" Emma asked her. "Like what?"

Regina huffed, annoyed. "Miss Swan, is there a reason you are lingering in my hallway other than eavesdropping, or are you simply here to ask pointless questions and annoy me?"

"Like True Love?" Emma asked, ignoring Regina's snippy outburst. "Happy endings?"

Chocolate eyes closed tightly as Regina swallowed thickly.

Emma pushed off the wall and took a step closer to the woman. "Are those the *ridiculous* things that she believes in that you don't?"

"Yes," Regina whispered as she finally reopened her eyes and locked gazes with the blonde moving ever closer to her.

"You know those are *real* things," Emma told her, smiling almost sadly at the brunette. "You've seen them. I'm the living, breathing *result* of them. They aren't ridiculous, Regina. They're real, and you know it."

Regina felt as if she was drowning in the emerald sea of Emma's eyes as her throat burned and her chest ached. "Not for me," she whispered so quietly that the words were hardly more than breath.

"Regina," Emma began, but Regina shook her head and moved away from her.

"I'm going to bed, Miss Swan," she said softly. She didn't meet Emma's gaze as she turned and headed toward her room.

Emma let out a sigh, shrugged, and then began to follow her.

Regina whipped around when she realized that Emma was following her. She stopped just in front of her bedroom door and arched a brow at the blonde. "What exactly do you think you are doing?"

"Going to bed," Emma told her, grinning.

"This is *my* room," Regina countered, that brow practically disappearing into her hair.

"Well, it's going to be *our* room tonight," Emma laughed out.

Regina scoffed. "What the hell are you talking about?" She glanced down the hallway as she realized that she had raised her voice. When she heard and saw no children stirring, Regina brought her gaze back to Emma. "You have your own home to sleep in."

"It's late," Emma told her, almost whining.

"Fine," Regina bit out. "I have two extra guest rooms besides the one that R is currently occupying. Do help yourself if you must."

"Eh," Emma said, still grinning in that way that made Regina's heart race while simultaneously setting her teeth on edge. "I don't know." She swayed from side to side as she stood just across from Regina, enjoying herself entirely too much. "R thinks we're together. You heard what she said about not wanting to *disturb* us in *our* room. Wouldn't it just be easier to keep up appearances and let her think what she wants to think than explain the truth to her?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "We can do that without actually sleeping together, dear."

"But what if she does actually get up in the middle of the night and come down here?" Emma argued. "How are you going to explain me sleeping in

the guest room instead of with you?"

"I will tell her that we had a disagreement," Regina countered, shrugging it off.

"Oh come on!" Emma hissed. "She thinks we have one of those great fairytale romances. You really want her to think that she grows up to marry someone she can't even stand to be in the same bed with?"

Regina's stomach lurched uncomfortably as the haunting truth that she actually *had* been forced into a marriage with someone she could not stand to be in the same bed with flitted through her mind. As long ago as that had been, Regina could still feel the ghost of Leopold on her flesh sometimes. It made her loathe the long, sleepless nights with a fury that crept into her dreams.

She gulped down the bile that had risen in her throat at the thought and found herself nodding. "Fine," she managed to choke out. She then turned sharply on her heel, threw open the door to her bedroom and stepped inside. "But you are sleeping on the floor," she added as she made her way toward her large walk-in closet.

Emma chuckled as she stepped over the threshold and into Regina's massive master bedroom. "No I'm not," she sing-songed as she looked around.

"What was that?" Regina snapped back at her, turning back to the blonde so that Emma could see that wicked arch in her brow again.

"Nothing," Emma told her, grinning. "Got something I can sleep in?" She grabbed the bedroom door and clicked it closed behind her before following Regina further into the room.

On the other side of the door, in the quiet hallway, Henry's sleepy face popped out from behind his own bedroom door. His eyes narrowed in the direction of his mother's bedroom as he scratched at his wild hair. Had Emma really just gone to bed with his mom?

"Interesting," Henry muttered to himself, the tiny cogs in his brain already turning.

Emma and Regina lay stiffly atop Regina's bed, each as far from the other as possible. Neither one of them could sleep, so they took to staring at Regina's ceiling through the dark. When Regina heard Emma's soft chuckling, she sighed exasperatedly.

"What is so amusing, Miss Swan?"

Emma chuckled again and smugly said, "I knew you wouldn't *really* make me sleep on the floor."

Regina rolled her eyes in the dark. "Oh, I would have," she countered. "I merely did not wish to hear your incessant whining."

"When have I ever whined incessantly?" Emma challenged, turning to look at the brunette. She could just make out Regina's rigid jawline and the fluttering movement of the woman's eyelashes as she blinked in the dark.

"Shall I count the times, dear?"

"Oh seriously," Emma scoffed. "Name *one* time."

"When you threw a temper tantrum on the ship on the way to Neverland and jumped overboard just to prove a point," Regina said after mulling it over for a minute.

"Okay, first of all, it was *not* a temper tantrum," Emma told her. "It was the only way I could get anybody's attention since the rest of you were acting like idiots and punching each other."

"Your *mother* started—"

"SECOND of all," Emma said, cutting Regina off, "how does that even come close to qualifying as 'whining'? Don't you have to actually be verbally bitching about something in order for it count as whining?"

"No," Regina said simply, and Emma just rolled her eyes and chuckled.

"Alright, Regina," she said. "Whatever you say."

Another long, awkward silence grew between them as they went back to staring up at the ceiling. Regina closed her eyes and listened to the gentle sounds of Emma's shallow breathing for a while, and then without even realizing what she was doing, her own voice whispered into the quiet air again to break the silence.

"Were you really going to kiss her?"

Emma rolled onto her side to face Regina, her heart beginning to pound beneath her ribs. "R?" she asked almost breathlessly.

Regina didn't say anything in response, but Emma saw the woman's head nod slowly in the dark.

"No," Emma told her after several long, deep breaths. "I wasn't."

Regina surprised her then by rolling over to face her as well. A massive stretch of the mattress still rested coldly between them, but the fact that they were curled beneath a common cover and watching one another in the dark somehow felt so incredibly intimate.

"You weren't?" Regina asked, her tone disbelieving.

"I wasn't," Emma repeated, her own tone completely sincere.

Regina swallowed thickly before whispering, "Did you *want* to?"

Emma's answer was almost immediate. "No."

Regina was shocked by the way that single word stung on her flesh and in her heart. "Oh," she replied quietly.

"Not because of *her*," Emma then said, trying to find Regina's dark gaze in the shadows of the quiet room. She scooted an inch or two toward the center of the bed, hoping Regina wouldn't freak out or tell her to scoot back.

When she didn't, Emma scooted another inch and said, "Well, it was *kind of* because of her."

"What do you mean?" Regina asked, her breath growing shallow in her lungs as she felt the mattress shake and dip with each movement the blonde made.

Emma sighed and rubbed a hand down her face before tucking it under the pillow beneath her cheek. "She's only sixteen," Emma told her. "I'm twice her age. So, there's that, I guess, and well..."

"Well what?" Regina asked, and she held her breath as Emma scooted yet another inch closer.

"She only wants me," Emma told her, "because she *thinks* she's supposed to, but even if it was real, even if it was genuine, I couldn't go there with her."

Regina closed her eyes and braved scooting an inch over, herself.

Emma's heartbeat became rapid as she felt Regina shift closer to her. "She's not there yet," the blonde continued. "You know what I mean?"

Regina shook her head against her pillow. "No."

"She's not *there*," Emma said again. "She hasn't experienced enough. She hasn't..."

"What?" Regina asked, desperate to hear what it was that the blonde was holding back.

Emma let out a sigh that sounded almost sad. "She hasn't suffered yet," she finally said. "I mean, she *has*, but not in the ways that *you* have."

Regina was shocked by this bit of information. "And that's a *bad* thing?" she asked.

"No," Emma told her. "It just makes her incompatible with me, because god knows I've suffered. I need someone who understands that. I need

someone..." Her voice cracked as she inched even closer to Regina, until they were sharing the same pillow.

"Someone who has suffered as much as you have," Regina finished for her in a breathless whisper.

Emma nodded and let out another sad sigh, the breath hitting Regina's cheeks in a hot puff. "Yeah," she whispered. "Someone like you."

***Chapter 11*: Chapter 11**

A/N: I actually wrote the first drabble/section of this chapter to a soundtrack. If you would like to give a try, I would encourage you to do so. It's a gorgeous song that I think enhances this beginning scene beautifully. I wrote this to a soundtrack of "Petrichor" by Keaton Henson, featuring Ren Ford. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Eleven

Emma nodded and let out another sad sigh, the breath hitting Regina's cheeks in a hot puff. "Yeah," she whispered. "Someone like you."

Regina sucked in a sharp breath. Emma's face was close enough now to hers that she could clearly see the features previously hidden within the shadows of the room. She could see the conflict of competing emotions swirling in Emma's eyes, which somehow remained bright even in the darkness.

"Emma..." she whispered softly, the syllables dancing over Emma's nose in a rush of warm breath. "What are we doing?"

Emma's heart raced beneath her ribs. "I don't know," she answered honestly. "I...I don't know."

Regina's eyes snapped tightly shut when she felt Emma's fingertips collide with her own beneath the sheet as if the blonde's hand had been slowly inching toward hers for years and had finally arrived. She let herself be touched, turning her hand slowly over and allowing Emma to tangle their fingers together in the small space between their bodies.

That single physical connection felt like a revelation, a gift of comfort offered freely and without condition. The raw truth of that simple touch quaked in Regina's bones as if the gods themselves had shaken her between

their fists, shaken her soul loose from the cage she had kept it in for decades.

Dark eyes fluttered slowly open again, and Regina's breath was siphoned from her lungs as the smallest hint of a smile pulled at the shadowed corner of Emma's mouth. Regina swallowed thickly and quietly said, "Just yesterday, we were barely friends."

Emma's smile only grew, but it grew in increments—slow, almost as if it wasn't deliberate. Regina's trembling voice and delicate fingers drew it out of her, and so she smiled, and she shook her head gently against Regina's pillow. "I think we both know that that isn't true," she whispered.

Regina held her gaze, and her tongue felt thick in her mouth as she asked, "It isn't?"

"We've been a lot of things to each other," Emma answered quietly, "in a short amount of time."

"Mm," Regina hummed in agreement, never letting go of Emma's gaze. She had latched herself to the truths growing steadily more and more visible in those sparkling depths.

"Strangers," Emma whispered. "Acquaintances."

"Obstacles," Regina added softly, squeezing Emma's fingers tightly.

Emma chuckled against the sheet of Regina's pillow as she nodded. "Co-workers," the blonde then added, and Regina pursed her lips almost playfully.

"Not quite," Regina told her, "but close enough." Emma's smile arrested her in that moment, and Regina offered one of her own in return, a genuine one that Emma knew to be a true and precious rarity.

Emma squeezed Regina's hand before releasing it and letting her fingers trail up to the woman's wrist, stroking timidly but deliberately as she then glided up over Regina's forearm, her bicep, her shoulder, and then rested

atop her collarbone. Her fingertips were just visible, peeking out from beneath the sheet. She held Regina's gaze as she whispered, "Painful reminders of hard realities," and Regina felt her eyes begin to sting.

"Yes," the brunette agreed in a barely-there hiss of breath. Her body trembled beneath Emma's touch, and while Regina didn't quite know how to interpret or even comprehend what it was that was building now between them, she found she had no need to. She had never felt more present in her entire life, so aware of every minute release of breath, so deeply in tune with every beat in her chest. It was the most alive she had felt in many long, hollow years.

She brought her own hand up to rest gently over Emma's, both now laid atop her collarbone, feeling the steady rise and fall of her every breath. "Allies," she said after a long moment of silence.

"But never enemies," Emma finished solemnly. "Even when we were at each other's throats, even when we went after one another so viciously, attacking, sabotaging...and hell, even *cursing*. Did you ever feel it beneath the surface?"

"Feel what?" Regina asked. "Hatred?"

"Yeah."

Regina let the reality of Emma's words, the reality that her words *implied*, sink in, and she found a truth in them that made her heart clench tightly in her chest. "No," she finally whispered honestly.

"What did you feel?" Emma asked her, her own pulse dancing rapidly as she felt Regina's flutter so near her fingertips. They were on the precipice of something that neither could exactly define, and for the first time in her life, Emma was not afraid of it. She didn't feel like she was nearing the edge of an unknown abyss. She felt, instead, like she was on the verge of discovering something she had long sought, perhaps even without realizing it.

Regina didn't know why she allowed herself to be so raw in that moment, so open and vulnerable, and to a woman she had long struggled against, but she did. Maybe it was the quiet stillness of her bedroom in the night. Maybe it was Emma's steady hand resting so near her unsteady heart. Maybe it was merely that it was easier to be open in the dark.

Maybe it was the fact that of all the things she and Emma had ever been to one another, the most glaring and honest of all was as simple and as complex as a single word—*destiny*.

Regina licked her dry lips as she held Emma's gaze. "Fear," she admitted. "It was always fear, even when I intended to curse you."

Emma's eyes grew soft and warm as she nodded. "Maybe, sometimes, we fear the things we might need the most."

"You think I need you?" Regina asked, and it wasn't harsh. It wasn't hard. It wasn't angry or accusatory or even mocking. It was simple and quiet, an honest question that seemed to linger in the air between them.

Emma closed her eyes for only a moment, sucking in a gentle breath. It was hard to be this open with her emotions. It had never been something she had enjoyed or even been good at, but this felt important. It felt right. "Maybe," she began again, opening her eyes once more to lock gazes with Regina in the dark. "Maybe we need each other."

Regina's throat and chest felt tight as she let those words sink in. "Why now?" she asked.

Emma shrugged then, their stacked hands slipping up to cup gently along the curve of Regina's slender neck. "Why not?" she countered almost breathlessly.

"I need to know," Regina told her, and it was true. She feared that perhaps they were becoming wrapped up in a quiet moment, a moment made for romance but perhaps wasn't made for them despite how genuine it felt. "Is it because of R?"

Emma was silent a long moment as she let that question roll around inside her head. "I don't know," she finally answered. "I really don't. I think she definitely opened my eyes a bit, but I also think that whatever this is has been building between us for a while. Maybe we just couldn't get over ourselves long enough to actually see it."

"Emma," Regina whispered. "You know I am not her. I am not that sweet, innocent girl anymore. I...I have been every bit the monster that I am claimed to be."

Emma's eyes stung horribly at the raw agony that seemed to dust Regina's voice when she spoke those words. She scooted just an inch nearer so that she could feel the heat of Regina's body radiate over and melt into her own. She let her hand slide up a bit higher and then higher still until she was cupping Regina's cheek. She swiped her thumb along the woman's jaw before latching onto Regina's hand and pulling it over to rest it atop her own cheek.

Regina's breath stilled in her lungs as she touched Emma's face with reverence and felt Emma's hand return to her cheek as well. They touched one another hesitantly, but they touched still, fingertips gliding over expressions in the dark, and when Regina's thumb trailed over Emma's bottom lip, she felt the blonde's words as they vibrated out and into the quiet air.

"Sometimes, all it takes is a little light," Emma whispered against Regina's touch, "and the monsters just disappear."

Henry poked his head out of his bedroom and glanced carefully around the hall. He listened for sounds throughout the house, but heard nothing, which meant he was the first person awake just as he had planned to be; it was the whole reason he had gotten up before the sun. Any later and his adoptive mother would have undoubtedly been up as well.

Regina typically let him sleep in on the weekends, so it was almost a guarantee that she wouldn't be in to check on him until at least nine, so he had plenty of time to complete his desired task. The only problem was

getting out and then back in without being noticed. Thankfully, it seemed that the getting-out part would be pretty simple since he was the only one yet awake.

Henry stepped out of his room, already fully dressed, and darted toward the stairs as quietly and quickly as possible. He made his way down, careful to avoid making any noise, and when he hit the landing, a triumphant grin blasted across his lips. Sometimes, it was just *too* easy.

"Oh, good morning, Henry."

Or not.

Henry's body froze in place even as his head whipped to the side to see the teenage version of his mother seated on the living room sofa in the still-mostly dark living room. It was honestly a little creepy. The television wasn't on and neither were the lights. R was literally just sitting there in the dark, dressed in a set of his mother's silky pajamas, alone and quiet.

"Uh...hey R," he said. "What are you doing up?"

R smiled at him as Henry finally moved and made his way over to the couch to take a seat beside her. "Oh, I am always up rather early," she told him. "I take it you are as well?" Her smile then widened as she said, "You *are* my son after all."

Henry laughed awkwardly and shook his head. "No, actually," he answered. "I usually sleep in until Mom makes me get up."

"I see," R replied softly. "Why is today an exception then?"

"Er..." Henry hesitated. He didn't know if he could trust R enough to tell her his plan, because honestly, the younger version of his mother seemed like a real goody two-shoes, which was just comical if he really thought about it. Still, he was pretty sure that R would squeal on him, so maybe it would be best to postpone his plan. That was going to make it pretty hard to get away with when he finally could execute it, but Henry didn't see a better way of accomplishing what he intended. "I just couldn't sleep. Bad dreams."

"Oh," R said quietly, her smile growing sad. She hesitated only a moment before reaching out and sliding her arm around Henry's shoulders. She patted him as she confessed, "I have them as well."

Henry actually felt an ache develop in his chest at the somber expression on his young mother's face. So, he quickly jumped to his feet and held out his hand to her. "Well, since we're both up, you wanna make breakfast?"

R took his hand and rose gracefully from the couch. "Do you know how to cook?"

"Uh..." Henry grinned at her. "Sure. Let's go."

"Very well," R answered, excitement now evident in her voice. "May I use the bread machine again?"

Henry giggled as he pulled her toward the kitchen. "The toaster?"

"Yes, yes, the *toaster*," R replied happily. "I find it quite exhilarating."

"Even better, R," Henry told her. "I'll let you use the *stove*."

***Chapter 12*: Chapter 12**

A/N: Sorry for the delay. I've been spending time with family and celebrating pride. I hope everyone enjoys this chapter and thank you so much for the wonderful reviews and support. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Twelve

"Do people usually have pie for breakfast in Fairy-Tale Land?" Henry asked, his brows furrowing as he grabbed a rolling pin and handed it to R.

The teen stopped what she was doing and turned to look at him. Her expression mirrored his—pure confusion. "Fairy-Tale Land?" she asked. "I am afraid I have never heard of such a place. Is it a realm of magic?"

Henry giggled. "I'm talking about the place where you come from."

"Oh," R said, still confused, "but I come from no such place. My home is in the Enchanted Forest."

Henry only laughed harder at that. "Right," he said, not wanting to delve into the whole all-of-you-people-are-fairy-tales thing. "Sorry. Do people usually eat pies for breakfast there?"

R blushed slightly as she shook her head. "I am afraid I only know how to make apple pie. I have never learned another recipe, and this one required much secrecy. Our kitchen maid taught me one evening when I could not sleep and snuck from bed."

Henry smiled at her. "Well that's okay," he told her. "Mom loves apples. She has a big apple tree over behind Town Hall."

"I have one as well," R said happily. "My father helped me to plant its seed when I was only a girl. I have tended to it ever since."

"I know," Henry replied easily, neglecting to tell her that it was the same one. He didn't know the lifespan of an apple tree, but just in case it was

weird for a tree to last over thirty years and a move to an entirely new realm, he kept that part to himself. Too many details would lead back to the Curse, he figured, and he didn't want to have to tell R about that.

They shared another small smile. "So, can I help you?" he asked her.

"Of course you may," R told him, beaming. "I hope Emma enjoys apple pie as well."

"Probably," Henry answered, shrugging, "but let's make her some bacon just in case."

"You are thoughtful," R said sweetly, turning to smile at her future son. Her heart fluttered at the way he grinned at her. "I believe I have done well with you, Henry," R whispered, her eyes shimmering in the kitchen light.

"What do you mean?"

"I have always been rather worried that I might end up like my own mother," she admitted, ducking her head a bit, "that it might be rather unavoidable, but it seems I have done well with you. You are a kind and beautiful young man. I hope it is because I have been a proper mother to you."

Henry's head swam with memories, and then guilt roared in his gut for the way he had turned on his mother in recent years before finding his way back to her. He had never known that Regina was so insecure deep down. He'd been so quick to judge her because of some stupid book that didn't even tell him the whole story.

He swallowed that sick feeling and told R the truth, hoping it might make some small semblance of amends. "Yeah," he said, "you're a great Mom."

R's radiant smile felt like a small piece of redemption.

Regina's nose twitched as a peculiar scent filtered in through her nostrils. She tried to dismiss it and burrow back into sleep, clenching her eyes

tightly closed and refusing to open them, but the smell only seemed to grow stronger, assaulting her senses to the point that she could no longer ignore it.

She sighed as she rubbed at her eyes before opening them, only to immediately gasp and jerk back as she came face to face with Emma Swan. Their faces had been only a few inches apart, and Emma's hand was still on Regina's waist, having slipped from her back with the brunette's movement.

Emma stirred. "What?" she asked groggily, blinking rapidly and rubbing at her face. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Regina said quickly. "I..."

Emma smiled sleepily at her. "You forgot I was here?"

Regina nodded against her pillow and Emma chuckled. The sound was raw and raspy, and it made Regina's flesh tingle.

"Not every day you wake up in bed with your sworn enemy's daughter, huh?" Emma joked, squeezing Regina's side before even realizing that she was, in fact, touching the former queen. She could feel Regina's bare flesh where the brunette's night shirt had ridden up a bit. Emma pulled her hand back to her own body. "Sorry."

"It's fine," Regina told her, feeling a bit awkward but not entirely uncomfortable. The previous night seemed to come back in flashes, though Regina could not even recall actually falling asleep. She and Emma had been talking about...well, things Regina had never even dreamed of talking to Emma Swan about, but they had talked about them nonetheless—terrifying things, thrilling things—a connection Regina both did and did not want to further contemplate. She must have drifted off mid-conversation, or maybe Emma had fallen asleep first. She couldn't remember.

"You okay?" Emma asked her quietly, and Regina nodded again, her cheek making a swishing sound as it brushed against the pillow they were sharing.

"Are you?" Regina returned, and Emma only smiled at her—slow and deliberate and undeniably cute.

Ugh. Cute. Regina scolded herself internally for even thinking it. What the hell were they doing? What had they been thinking? Had they simply gotten caught up in a strange, unprecedented moment and let it sweep them away into fantasies of a romance that undoubtedly could and would never develop between them?

"Hey."

Regina looked up, locking onto those emerald eyes in the early morning light. As soon as their gazes connected, Emma's brows furrowed. "Stop overthinking it," the blonde said.

"What?" Regina asked.

"You're doing that thing where you get all inside your head," Emma told her.

"I do no such thing," Regina denied, scoffing.

"Yeah you do," Emma laughed out. "You get in your head, and then nothing shows but the conflict in your eyes, and then you either lash out or run. It's okay. I do it too, but *don't* this time, okay? Just don't overthink it. We talked. We said some things that we should probably talk some more about, but it was just a talk nonetheless. So, relax."

Regina swallowed hard. "How are you so calm about this?" she asked the blonde. "You said things to me last night that no one...that you shouldn't have said."

"Why shouldn't I have said them?"

"Because," Regina said pointedly, as if that single word was a thorough explanation.

Emma only responded with a deadpan stare until Regina sighed dramatically and tried again. "*Because*," she repeated, "I am the Evil Queen,

and you are the Savior."

"So?"

"So, I tried to kill your mother," Regina said plainly. "I tried to kill *you*, more or less."

"Thanks for the history lesson," Emma drawled, "but you'll have to do better than that, Regina."

"Why?" Regina asked her. "Why should I need any further explanation? The history is enough."

"Not for me," Emma argued, "and I don't think it really is for you either."

"How are you so calm about this?" Regina asked her again. "You have said more than once that you run when things become complicated, and yet you are trying to convince me that we should make things even *more* complicated."

Emma sighed and tucked her hand under her cheek. "Things have always been complicated between us. Hell, this whole town is complicated, Regina. That's nothing new."

"And?"

"And maybe I'm tired of running," Emma whispered, shrugging. She then grinned at Regina and asked, "You wanna stop running, too? Maybe take a walk with me instead?"

Regina sucked in a sharp breath, and that's when the smell that had woken her spilled into her nose again. Her head popped up off her pillow. "What is that?"

"Changing the subject won't m—"

Regina smacked Emma's shoulder. "That smell," she said, interrupting the blonde. "Do you smell it?"

Emma rolled her eyes, still thinking Regina was just trying to avoid the subject, but she took a deep breath in through her nose anyway. Yeah. She definitely smelled it. "Smells like something is—"

"—burning," Regina finished, nodding.

They both looked at one another, confused, but then at the same time, they said, "Henry."

Henry coughed heavily as he opened the oven door to be met with a billowing cloud of black smoke. He gagged and coughed as he waved his hands through the smoke, trying to clear it.

"R," he coughed out, "grab the fire extinguisher!"

R stood behind him, her expression distraught, and her hands knotted together as she rocked on her heels nervously. "I know not what that is!" she answered, her voice ripe with her panic.

"It's the red metal cylinder thing over there with the nozzle on it," Henry told her, grabbing a towel to try to fan away the smoke. "It's bracketed to the wall."

R glanced quickly around, her heart pounding in her chest. Not even a full twenty-four hours in the future and she had already caused a kitchen fire. She felt terrible and terribly out of place.

"There!" she shouted, mostly to herself, as her eyes zeroed in on the red metal cylinder Henry had mentioned. She shot quickly across the room to grab it just as the loud shrieking cry of the smoke alarm ripped through the kitchen and pulsed in her ears. Not knowing what it was, R screamed and jumped at the sound.

"What is this madness?!" she shrieked, clamping her hands over her ears as her panic only continued to grow.

Henry continued to fan the smoke but quickly realized that it was only causing the small fire in the oven to grow, so he threw the towel aside and ran over to join R. "It's just the smoke alarm," he told her as he shot by her and grabbed the fire extinguisher. "We have to get this fire out. Mom's gonna freak."

"Oh goodness," R muttered, her voice growing into a desperate whine. "Oh gods. What have I done?"

"How the heck do you work this thing?" Henry growled, frustrated as he fiddled with the fire extinguisher while trying to read the instructions. He squinted at the words through the smoke. "Pull the pin out? What pin? This metal thing?" He yanked it out, and a moment later, white foam sprayed into the room as he squeezed the nozzle—first it sprayed on Henry as he had been foolishly aiming the nozzle at himself and a little on R who was standing behind him, then randomly into the air and on the kitchen counter, and then finally into the oven.

"Henry!"

Henry whirled around, the foam going with him, and he dropped the can upon seeing his present-day mother standing in the kitchen doorway, wide-eyed, and flanked by his other mother, who somehow looked both concerned and amused. The fire extinguisher thudded to the floor, clinking as it bounced a few times before rolling away, and then he and R, covered in white, stood frozen in front of the successfully extinguished yet still smoking oven. They both looked equally guilty, though R was clearly rather frightened as well.

"Uh," Henry muttered. "We can explain."

R shook her head frantically. "I cannot explain. I have no idea what happened. I tried to bake a pie, and then I set the house ablaze. Please forgive me."

Emma snorted, unable to hold her laughter in any longer. She couldn't help herself. The sight of her son and Regina's younger self both covered in white foam and desperately trying not to get in trouble was hilarious and

adorable. "It's okay, R," she laughed out. "Relax. You didn't set the house on fire, just the oven."

Regina elbowed her in the side. She cut a glare in Emma's direction and quietly hissed, "Is my oven of no value?"

"Regina," Emma deadpanned, "really? The girl is terrified."

Regina sighed and turned back to her younger self. "It's fine, dear," she bit out, "I suppose." She then pinned her son with a glare that was pure lecture and said, "Explain."

"We wanted to make you guys breakfast," he told her, chewing on his bottom lip and shifting nervously from foot to foot. "R told me she knew how to make pie, so I told her to use the oven, and then I put the bacon in there too because I figured it would be easier than frying it and I've seen you do it before."

Emma stepped around Regina and walked over to the oven. Realizing it was still on, she quickly turned the knob until it clicked off. "H!" she exclaimed. "Why did you have the oven turned all the way up to broil?"

"I didn't set it!" He told her. "I told R to turn it on."

"Did you tell her to what degree," Regina asked, "or did you merely tell her to turn the knob over?"

Henry's face instantly fell. "Crap."

The room fell silent as Regina shook her head at her son, and then a moment later, R cleared her throat and quietly said, "I truly *do* know how to make pie."

And Emma burst into laughter all over again.

***Chapter 13*: Chapter 13**

Chapter Thirteen

Emma smirked, trying not to laugh, as she watched her son shift uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Hold still, kid," she teased. "We're not going to skewer you alive for causing a fire. Calm down."

"I can't help it," Henry groaned as he shuffled in place again. "I think some of the foam slid down the back of my pants."

Emma couldn't hold her laughter in then. "That sucks," she laughed out, "but you're just going to have to wait to change." She then pointed to Regina, who hadn't moved from her position on the opposite side of the kitchen. The woman's brows were furrowed and her gaze was fixed intently on the blackened and smoking oven behind her son. "Your mom is trying to plan her lecture."

Henry groaned again. "Do we have to get a lecture?" he whined. "We're sorry, okay? It won't happen again, we swear." He glanced over at R then and raised his brows at her expectantly. "*Right* R?"

R nodded quickly, eyes wide and sincere. "Yes absolutely," she agreed. "I will never bake another pie. You have my word."

Emma snickered again. "Oh man, Regina," she said, addressing the still-silent woman, "you're going to have to chill out on that glare. You're making your younger self pie-phobic."

Regina blinked a few times and sighed as she pressed her fingertips to her temple. "Emma, stop teasing her." She then offered R and Henry a tight-lipped smile. "No lecture today, dears."

"Whoa, really?" Henry asked, surprised. He was used to getting lectures on responsibility and proper safety and preparation when using appliances.

"Really," Regina told him, nodding. "I was simply trying to determine how best to handle this..." she pointed toward the scene surrounding her son and younger self, "...mess."

Henry glanced behind him at the mess his mother was referencing. "Sorry," he said again, biting his lip.

Regina nodded in answer before motioning over her shoulder. "Go on upstairs and shower, Henry."

"Okay," Henry answered, nodding, before heading toward the kitchen doorway.

Regina then smiled softly at R. "You may shower as well, dear, or bathe if you prefer."

"A bath does sound lovely," R admitted, smiling sweetly and ducking her head a bit.

Regina made her way over toward the oven, contemplating whether she should actually clean the mess and make repairs or simply magic the mess away entirely. She patted R's shoulder as she passed and said, "Emma can show you where to go and help you with running the water."

Emma nodded and started to make her way around the kitchen island. "No problem," she said, smiling over at R. "Ready kid?"

"I am no child," R told her, and her blushing smile gave away that she was simply teasing. Her cheeks only grew redder as she then asked, "Should it not be Regina who helps me with the bath?"

Emma chuckled. "I can handle it, R," she replied. "I've taken plenty of baths and showers in my life."

"No," R told her, still smiling shyly. "I trust you can operate whatever strange apparatus this kingdom's baths undoubtedly require."

Emma snorted at the wording, and Regina shot her a quick glare over her shoulder from where she was bent in front of the oven. Emma made a face

at her as if to say, "What? It's funny and you know it!" before turning back to R.

"So what's the problem then?" she asked the teen.

"I simply assumed that it would be more appropriate for Regina to assist me," R told her. "Do you not take the same stance with nudity as you do with kissing?"

"Uh..." Emma muttered, confused. "Say what now?"

R's words had captured Regina's full attention as well, and the former queen turned to face her younger self. "What do you mean, dear?" Regina asked her.

R's cheeks were as red as the apples on Regina's beloved tree as she cleared her throat and did her best to explain. She glanced over to Emma. "You said you wished not to ruin our first kiss by having it here, in the future. Should you not also wish to avoid seeing me nude for the same reason? Would that not be something I should save for my own time when I give you my virtue?"

Emma's own face practically exploded with her blush as she stuttered and mouthed her way through several words that never fully found voice.

Regina's entire body was rigid as she blinked rapidly, trying to process what she had just heard. She regained herself quickly enough and cleared her throat roughly. "Well," she said, her voice thick, "I will go ahead and take you to the bath then, dear."

R simply smiled and nodded. "Thank you!" she chimed as she followed Regina out of the kitchen, completely unaware of just how intensely both Regina and Emma were attempting to avoid one another's eyes.

R hovered over Regina's shoulder, naked but for the robe Regina had given her to cover with, and she watched as her future self ran her hand under the

tub faucet to feel the water and then turned the silver knobs above it yet again.

"Why must you keep turning them?" R asked.

"I'm simply adjusting the temperature, dear," Regina told her. "I want to make sure it is nice and warm for you."

R's face scrunched in confusion. "But you need not actually *heat* the water?"

"No," Regina answered. "It is heated already." She pointed to the silver knobs. "These knobs control the temperature."

R stared at the knobs, fascinated. "It is like magic," she said, smiling softly.

Regina chuckled in response. "No, dear," she told her, "it isn't magic. It's plumbing."

"This kingdom is so advanced," R whispered in awe, and Regina smiled as she stood up and turned to face her younger self.

"It is certainly different," she agreed. "Now, are you ready?"

R nodded quickly, and reached for the tie at the front of her robe. A second later, she was completely bare as the robe pooled around her feet. She didn't feel the slightest bit shy given that the woman seeing her actually *was* her.

Regina's eyes scanned quickly down the body of her younger self, and she sighed as she motioned toward the tub. She could definitely see the differences, though she could admit that she had certainly aged gracefully. Still, it was nice to have an actual visual reminder of how pristine her body had once been.

That was, of course, until R turned to enter the tub and Regina got a good look at her back.

Long white lines decorated the flesh there; scars, and Regina knew exactly where they had come from. Before she could stop herself, she reached out

and touched R's back, running her index finger along a few inches of one of the thin lines.

R turned to look at her then. "I..." she started, fully aware of why Regina had touched her, and what the woman had been tracing.

Regina, though, instantly shushed her. "Don't," she said. "Don't try to explain or excuse what she did to you..." She hesitated before adding, "...to us."

Grabbing R's hand, Regina then simply moved forward and helped her younger self into the bath. R sank down into the water with a sigh, and Regina seated herself atop the closed lid of the toilet seat. She crossed her legs, resting her elbows atop them, and stared blankly at the floor, lost in memory.

"I do not wish to speak of it," R whispered after a moment, her fingers making small popping sounds as she tapped them atop the warm water.

Regina nodded even as she continued to stare blankly at the floor. "Nor do I," she whispered in return. She stared a moment longer before clearing her throat and shaking her head. When she looked back up at R, she could see the same turmoil that must be in her eyes reflected in the teen's. She smiled tenderly at her and asked, "Would you like to wash your hair?"

R returned the smile and reached to quickly wipe away a stray tear that had escaped her eye, leaving a wet streak behind. "Yes, please."

Regina moved to the floor, kneeling at the side of the tub, and reached for a small cup on the ledge. She dipped it into the water to fill it, and then poised it over R's head. Tenderly tipping R's head back, Regina poured the water slowly so that it cascaded over R's long dark hair, now loose from its braid.

The simple action reminded her of when Henry was small. He would splash around in the tub for an hour with his hair spiked up everywhere in the white foam of his shampoo while Regina sat beside the tub and watched

him. And when he was ready, she would fill the cup and rinse his hair, over and over until all the suds were gone.

Regina repeated the action now over and over, and while she did so, she carefully slipped R's hair to the side and slid her free hand down onto the teen's back.

She closed her eyes as she called forth her magic and then opened them again to watch as those long white lines all disappeared one by one.

"Okay," Regina said quietly when she was finished, R none the wiser. "Time for shampoo."

The two Regina's stood inside the large walk-in closet of the master bedroom, each staring at the many options of clothing around them.

"There are so many," R said in awe, and Regina hummed in agreement.

"What would you like to wear?" Regina asked her younger self. "Perhaps something simple?"

"What are those pants Emma wears?" R asked. "They seem comfortable, though I fear her tailor may have made them much too tight."

Regina had to stop herself from laughing aloud. "Yes," she agreed. "Miss Swan certainly wears her jeans like a second skin."

"Jeans?" R asked. "Is that what they are called?"

Regina nodded in answer, and R smiled. "Have you any of those?"

"I do," Regina answered. She then moved to the section of her closet where her pants hung, organized by material and color, and began to thumb through the selection.

"She is quite beautiful," R said as Regina looked through her jeans and began to pull several hangers from the bar, "Emma."

"She is an attractive woman, yes," Regina agreed. This conversation was quickly going to a place that Regina was not entirely comfortable with, yet she was well aware that she would have to endure it. If she and Emma were going to allow R to believe that they were a couple, then she would need to at least act as if she cared for the other woman.

Regina didn't even want to contemplate how much of it would be acting and how much of it would be the truth.

R smiled dreamily as she ran her hands over the material of the clothing hanging around her. "I imagine you were quite surprised to fall in love with a woman."

Regina bit her lip as she turned away from R, unsure of how to respond. After a moment, she merely said, "It was quite some time ago."

"Yes," R replied, nodding. "Does she treat you well?"

Regina turned to face her younger self and motioned toward the bedroom. They walked out into the room, and Regina set several pairs of jeans down on the mattress of her bed before facing R again. She didn't need to put on any kind of act when she said the following truth: "She treats me better than anyone has ever treated me."

Of course, she left out all the times they had fought, even physically, because in the bigger picture, those things didn't matter. They weren't then who they were now, now that they truly *knew* one another. And regardless of the horrid things they had, at times, said or done to one another, Emma had always treated Regina like an actual person; a human being as opposed to a twisted villain from an old fairy tale.

R's smile was bright and beautiful upon hearing those words. Her cheeks then tinted a soft red as she asked, "And her kiss?"

Regina arched a brow at her. "What about her kiss?"

"Does it make you weak?" R asked, her expression dreamy but shy.

Regina chuckled and held out a pair of jeans for R to try on. She didn't want to tell the girl that she didn't actually know, so instead, she merely said, "You will just have to wait and see, my dear."

***Chapter 14*: Chapter 14**

Chapter Fourteen

When Regina and R came back downstairs after dressing, they found Emma and Henry waiting for them in the kitchen. Henry's hair was still damp as he laughed about something unknown to the two women and Emma chuckled along with him. Regina took a moment to watch them from the doorway, R by her side.

R looked over at her older self in that moment, noticing the way Regina's chocolate eyes seemed to map every inch of the scene in front of them, and then the woman's lips began to tilt up in a gentle smile. It warmed R's heart, seeing her older self so happy and in love, or so she believed. Regina certainly looked the part in that moment.

Emma glanced up to see them a moment later, and R's heart only warmed further as the blonde's own smile only widened.

"Hey," Emma greeted. "What took you guys so long?"

"Yeah," Henry said. "I've been out of the shower for like twenty minutes now."

R's cheeks blushed beautifully as she glanced down at herself and then back up at the two people across from her, her future family. "Ladies require a bit more time, Henry," she told him, grinning softly.

Emma actually took a moment to look over R's outfit and her throat became slightly constricted. She glanced back and forth between R and Regina before clearing her throat and saying, "Uh...you look great, R."

R's blush deepened thoroughly as she ducked her head and swayed a bit from side to side. "I am glad to know you approve," she replied, biting her bottom lip and batting her eyelashes.

Beside her, Regina let out a soft sigh and rolled her eyes. It was difficult, she found, to have this version of herself exposed to people she never thought would see it, especially Emma. She tried to stop the voice in her head that said it was weakness, this naive and lovesick version of herself. She tried to stop that voice from saying that it would only make her vulnerable.

Instead, she tried to force herself to celebrate R's presence and be thankful for it, but that was just so terribly hard to do when she had been raised to believe such childish behavior to be weakness—weakness that should be hidden or eradicated. Still, Regina kept her internalized struggle to herself and kept her response to R's extremely obvious flirting with Emma Swan to a bare minimum of eye-rolling and mild huffs of sighs. Neither seemed to deter R's behavior at all.

And Emma...well, of course Emma was just eating it up. It was an annoyance. An annoyance and an irritation, Regina told herself. That was all it was—annoyance and irritation. Definitely not jealousy. Definitely not.

Emma smirked at Regina as the woman rolled her eyes, and Regina fought the urge to roll them again. She was on the verge of having a fully-functioning ferris wheel operating inside each of her eye sockets—just a constant circular motion going as she rolled them over and over and over again.

"Regina," Emma teased, "I didn't know you owned jeans."

Regina crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned against the door frame. "There are many things you don't know about me, Miss Swan."

Emma just kept smiling at her. "Mhm," the blonde hummed. "But I'm learning."

Regina's throat went dry in that moment as her heart fluttered and she averted her gaze. Henry stared back and forth between the two of them, his mind churning, and R just looked confused. Sometimes, Emma and Regina said things that made them seem like they didn't know one another at all.

That seemed so strange to R given that the two women were lovers. Perhaps that was simply the way of the future, though, she thought.

Regina kept her gaze averted as she asked, "Are we ready to go then?"

"Been ready," Henry chimed. He shot over to the doorway, grabbed R's hand, and yanked her along behind him as he headed for the front door of the mansion. "Let's go!"

Regina remained rooted to her spot as Emma's chair scraped across the floor when the blonde stood up. Emma walked over to where Regina was standing, leaned slightly in, and quietly said, "Those jeans, though," before letting out a soft whistle and walking off toward the door.

Regina's stomach flipped and flopped and then flipped again as she made to follow the blonde. "What about them?" she grumbled as she grabbed her jacket and keys.

"I'm just sayin'," Emma laughed out, opening the door for the brunette.

Huffing out an annoyed breath, Regina stopped in the open doorway, propped her hands on her hips, and snapped, "*What* exactly are you 'just saying', dear? You haven't said anything at all."

Emma just laughed and tapped her index finger against her temple. "In here, I've said plenty, Regina," she replied. "In my head, I'm saying *a lot*."

"Do you ever stop being strange and annoying?" Regina asked her, rolling her eyes yet again.

"Rarely," Emma replied, grinning. "Do you ever stop rolling your eyes?"

Regina cocked her head to the side before turning sharply on her heel and marching out of the house. "Rarely," she called over her shoulder, making Emma's smile grow and grow.

Regina drove the party of four to Mr. Gold's Pawn Shop, trying not to laugh every time they would see someone on the streets and Emma would shout

'Duck' to R in the backseat. They were trying to keep the girl's presence in Storybrooke a secret from any and all but those who *had* to know, so Emma's method of doing so had spawned from a good place and wasn't entirely ridiculous. R's initial reaction, though, had been pure comedy (if not slightly embarrassing), and *Emma's* reaction to *R's* reaction had been even funnier.

"Duck!" Emma had shouted as they passed Archie walking Pongo down Main Street.

Henry had immediately ducked his head, despite the fact that he hadn't needed to. R, however, had simply furrowed her brows and asked, "For dinner?" She then seemed to think on it for a moment before saying, "It seems a bit early for dinner, but if you insist, I suppose a nice roast duck would be fine. I *prefer* swan."

Emma's cheeks instantly colored a bright red as her eyes just slightly widened. Henry laughed out loud, his head popping back up from where it had been tucked down against his knees. "You eat ducks?!" he asked her, still giggling.

Regina's cheeks had colored slightly as well, but one glance over at Emma had her nearly biting through her lip to keep from laughing out loud much the same as Henry had done. It was sweet karma to see Emma so thoroughly affected by R's words, the usually *overly* confident Sheriff made speechless by the idea that Regina might *prefer* swan.

"Oh yes," R answered Henry, completely unfazed by the others' reactions. "Swan has a finer taste than duck and presents much better. Have you tried it?"

"No!" Henry practically squealed, his voice cracking, which was becoming a frequent occurrence for him. "I can't eat a duck! Or a swan!"

"Oh," R replied, nodding. "Are you allergic? I am not, myself, obviously, as I have eaten swan many times." Emma choked again, her cheeks coloring darker than before. Regina couldn't help letting a slight chuckle slip through

then. "However, I suppose not all allergies are inherited; unless, of course, Emma is allergic and you inherited the allergy from her."

Emma's hands were gripped tightly around her knees as she stared straight ahead, avoiding Regina's eyes, and stayed that way until they made it to Mr. Gold's shop. She only commanded the back-seat riders to duck twice after that, Henry making sure R knew that the blonde wasn't referring to an actual bird.

Regina just continued to revel in the extreme discomfort radiating off of Emma like a heat wave. It was hilarious, and if Regina was being honest, a little attractive. Knowing Emma could be *that* affected by the mere thought of her "eating swan" made Regina feel incredibly sexy and maybe even a little powerful. It was a feeling Regina had gone without for quite some time, so she pushed away her own slight embarrassment and let herself really revel in the moment.

She briefly recalled the time Rumpelstiltskin had found her in Leopold's dining hall, a feast of roast swan laid before her, and he had mentioned it being amusing. She hadn't thought on that moment since its occurrence, and it now made her shake her head, chuckle, and sigh. *What an ass*, she thought, still grinning as she parked her car in front of Gold's shop.

As soon as the car was parked, Henry flew out of his door and shot into the shop. This was his only chance to do what he had set out to do earlier that morning before he had run into R, lonely and curious. So, he had to act fast, and hopefully, his grandfather would be receptive to his request.

"Henry!" Regina called after him, but he was already inside, the bell above Gold's shop door jingling as it clicked to a close again. Regina turned and arched a brow at Emma over the hood of her car. "What was that about?"

Emma shrugged, stilling having a bit of difficulty making eye contact with Regina. Every time she did, her head swam with inappropriate thoughts. She was shocked by how quickly her thoughts about Regina and even her feelings for the woman seemed to escalate once Emma had actually taken notice of them. The realization somehow made them stronger, and Emma

was caught in a strange struggle of wanting to both tuck them away and let them out.

"Beats me," she answered the brunette. She helped R out of the car, and then the three women made their way into the shop.

"What is this place?" R whispered as she sneakily reached for Emma's hand and laced their fingers together. Emma glanced down, her throat constricting as she felt the teenager squeeze her hand. She didn't want to push R away, though, so she just let out a soft sigh and kept her fingers laced through R's.

"One of Regina's old friends works here," Emma told her, not sure how to accurately explain who Gold was. She didn't want to say his true name, because she knew that Rumpelstiltskin was known throughout the entire Enchanted Forest. She wasn't sure if R knew the name or not, but she wasn't going to take the chance that the girl might freak out if she heard it. "Her, uh...mentor, I guess is a good word."

They approached the counter and saw Gold bent over with his back to the three women. Henry was whispering rapidly into the man's ear, which made both Emma and Regina instantly suspicious.

"Henry?" Regina asked, arching a brow.

Henry backed away from Gold for a second to look at his mother. "I need to talk to him first," he told her. He then added, "In *private*."

Gold turned to face them then, and the smirk on his lips instantly fell as he did a small double-take. "Well, well," he drawled softly, the smirk slowly returning as his gaze danced back and forth across the space between Regina and R. "This should be interesting."

Regina rolled her eyes, Emma copied the action, and R shrunk back slightly behind the Sheriff. She didn't like the gleam in the man's eyes. It unnerved her. Emma squeezed her hand, though, in reassurance and it made her feel slightly better.

Before Gold could say another word, Henry tugged on the sleeve of the man's suit jacket. "*Grandpa*," he exclaimed, partially under his breath and partially out loud.

Gold sighed, letting his gaze fall away from the two Reginas momentarily to fix on his grandson once more. "Yes, fine Henry," he said quietly, allowing the boy to tug him toward the back room, hidden by a thin curtain. Before Gold closed the curtain, he turned back toward the three women once more. "It appears young Henry requires my full attention for a very important conversation. You will have to wait, dearies."

He then slid the curtain to block the ladies' view.

***Chapter 15*: Chapter 15**

A/N: Sorry for the delay on this chapter, everyone. My life has been a hectic mess lately, my health has not been the best, and I recently lost a loved one. So, I do apologize for making you all wait much longer than was intended, and thank you all for being patient. This chapter is a little longer to make up for it. Enjoy. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Fifteen

"Grandpa?" R repeated quietly once the curtain slid shut. Her brows furrowed as she looked up at Regina who had frozen upon hearing the single word. "Apologies, but I am terribly confused. Who is this man?" She then turned to Emma and asked, "Is he your father?"

Emma chewed on her lip as she looked over to Regina. She lifted a brow in silent question, but Regina was no help. The woman's expression merely mirrored Emma's own. Neither knew how to approach the subject or what to say.

"Um, well," Emma muttered before laughing awkwardly and scratching at the back of her head with the hand not currently entwined with one of R's.

"Is something humorous?" R asked, still confused and squeezing Emma's hand as if physically asking for answers she needed.

Emma unconsciously squeezed back, but her eyes remained fixed on Regina's. She laughed awkwardly again. *This damn town*, she thought. *People coming through ripples in time and everyone being related to my kid*. She sighed even through her laughter before saying, "And the award for most awkward moment goes to *right now*."

Regina's expression quickly morphed into a smirk, which then grew into a genuine smile. "No, dear," she disagreed. "The most awkward moment definitely goes to the one that only just occurred on the ride over."

Emma's cheeks reddened slightly. "Uh," she choked out. "Yup. Yup, you're right. That one definitely wins. I guess this one could be the runner up."

"Why is this moment so awkward?" R asked. "Could someone please answer at least one of my questions?"

Emma sighed and turned to look at the teen then. "Sorry kid," she said softly, smiling at her.

R's own smile was shy but radiant, and though she mumbled slightly, her words were audible. "I told you I am no child, Emma."

Emma chuckled and reached out to teasingly poke R's shoulder. "You're a kid to me, kid."

Regina watched the exchange, clenching her jaw without even realizing it. She cleared her throat roughly. "You are indeed an adolescent," Regina said firmly, and then before she could stop herself, she added, "and you should behave as such with proper respect for your elders, as you *well* know."

R's face flooded crimson and her gaze instantly fell to the floor. Her hand released its hold on Emma's and fell back to her side. "I apologize, Emma," she whispered.

Emma's gaze shot up to Regina, confusion and anger swirling in its depth. She placed a hand on R's shoulder as she said, "Hey, R, it's okay. You have nothing to apologize for. You were just teasing me. We're friends, right? It's okay for friends to tease each other every once in a while."

R said nothing, simply nodding while keeping her head down. Emma waited another second, but the teen did not look up, so she stalked over toward Regina, angry. She stepped right into Regina's personal space and completely ignored the now blatant guilt in Regina's expression as she whispered, "What the hell was that, Regina?"

Regina's jaw worked back and forth as she gritted and ground her teeth, angry at Emma for having unknowingly baited her, angry at whomever sent

her younger self through the ripple because having R around made her feel confused and vulnerable, and angry at herself for being angry at all.

"What the hell was *that*?" Regina bit back, tilting her head toward her younger self.

"What the hell was *what*?" Emma snapped at her.

"*You*," Regina practically growled under her breath, "coddling her."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Seriously?" she drawled. "I wasn't *coddling* her."

"You were coddling her," Regina said plainly, unwilling to budge. "You have been coddling her since the moment she arrived, laying under the stars with her and lying about my past in order to make it, I don't know, more romantic, and holding her hand for gods' sake!"

"I'm trying to be nice to her!" Emma hissed, now just as riled as Regina. She poked her index finger at Regina's chest. "You should take a lesson."

Regina's brows shot toward her hairline. "*Excuse* me?" she exclaimed, smacking Emma's finger away. "When have I been unkind to her?"

"I'm not saying you've been unkind to her," Emma replied, "but you sure as hell haven't been her biggest fan."

"I have taken care of her just as much as you have since her arrival," Regina argued, her face now red with her fury. She felt like steam might pour from her ears at any moment. "Oh, but I suppose whatever I do for her somehow counts as less because I'm not attempting to take her by the hand and make her feel as if all her dreams will come true."

"Well, what the hell is wrong with that?!" Emma practically shouted. "Why shouldn't I make her feel that way?"

"Because it is a lie!" Regina yelled in her face before jerking back and clamping a hand over her mouth. Her eyes instantly began to tear up with her anger and shock, and they locked hard onto Emma's as the blonde's expression went slack.

Emma's eyes widened even as her jaw dropped just slightly. The pain suddenly so achingly present in Regina's gaze was too much and incredibly telling. "I...Regina, I'm sorry," she choked out, her voice sounding weak and squeaky.

Regina breathed heavily, shaking her head gently back and forth. She wrapped her arms around her middle, and when Emma reached a hand toward her, she slinked away from it. "I need some air," she managed to bite out before turning quickly and darting out of the shop.

Emma watched her go, and her chest suddenly felt so constricted that she could hardly get the air she needed into her lungs. And then her gaze fell to R, whose big beautiful brown eyes were cloudy and confused.

As soon as the curtain was closed, Gold turned toward his grandson. "Henry," he began before the boy could go off on whatever rambling tirade was undoubtedly coming, "do you have any idea how this happened?"

"The thing with my mom?" Henry asked. He shook his head in answer without Gold even responding. "I don't know, but that's why we're here."

"Yes, I assumed as much," Gold replied, clasping his hands gently atop his cane as he leaned against the wall and eyed his grandson. "Now, would you care to tell me about this private matter you are so concerned with?"

"Well," Henry said, biting his lip and shrugging in a way that was somehow a perfect combination of Emma and Neal, but his eyes were hard and determined and that was all Regina. Henry could, at times, be such an interesting compilation of his three parents. It amazed Gold. "It's actually about this whole thing with my mom."

"Yes, I presumed as much since you insisted we speak right away," Gold told him, "but you are going to have to tell me exactly what it is you need from me, dearie."

Henry let out a huff of a sigh. When he spoke, his words came out in a fast-paced jumble. "Idon'twantyou to help them."

Gold's brow arched impossibly high. "Pardon?"

Henry chewed on his bottom lip again as he rocked back and forth on his heels. "I don't want you to help them," he said slowly this time, and his expression was riddled with guilt but that same determination remained in his eyes.

Gold was thoroughly surprised by the request. "And why is that, Henry?"

"Because she's fixing them," Henry told his grandfather. "R, she's fixing my moms. She's making them like each other."

"I was under the impression that your mothers had taken up a rather civil relationship since Neverland, dearie," Gold told him. "In fact, some might refer to them as friends, so I fail to see the issue."

"Yeah, I know," Henry huffed, agitated that he wasn't getting his point across. How could everyone in this town be so oblivious, and yet he always had things figured out ages ahead of time? Weren't these people supposed to be adults and royals and friggin' sorcerers? "And they *are* friends, I guess, but that's not what I meant."

"Then do get to the point, Henry," Gold replied dryly, "because as you and I both know, your mother is not a patient woman."

Henry grinned and laughed awkwardly, a miniature version of Emma in that moment. "Yeah, I know," he agreed, nodding. "I meant that R is helping them to *like* like each other, maybe even love each other."

Gold smirked, not a hint of surprise touching his features. Perhaps he wasn't as oblivious as Henry thought. "I see," he said, "and I take it you don't want me to send your mother's past self back to the past because of this? You wish her to stay."

Henry nodded. "At least until my moms get together."

"Hm," Gold hummed, tapping his cane gently against the floor a few times. "You do know that meddling with time is quite dangerous, Henry? The

longer Regina's younger self remains in this time, the more we risk changing things that ought not be changed."

A hint of fear flashed in Henry's eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was mess everything up, but he could tell that R's presence was changing things for his mothers. They were opening up to each other more than ever before; at least, it seemed like they were. Maybe he was just seeing what he wanted to see, but something told him it was true. R was bringing them closer. She could turn them into a family.

"Just a little longer," Henry finally pleaded. "Just a little longer, and if they don't get together, then you can send her back. Please, Grandpa."

Gold sighed and nodded. "It may be entirely out of my hands, Henry," he told his grandson. "I haven't the faintest clue as of yet how your mother's past self came to be in this time, so her return may be outside of my control. However, I will do my best."

Henry smiled, but before he could say anything, the sounds of shouting echoed in from the front room of the shop. He and Gold quickly made their way back toward the curtain, and Henry poked his head out just in time to see Regina stalking out of the door of the shop, leaving Emma and R behind.

"Ma?" he asked, and Emma whirled quickly around. "What happened to Mom?"

Emma's expression was pure guilt as she sighed. "I'm sorry, kid," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I made her mad or upset or something."

"So, go get her," Henry replied easily. "She can't have gone far. She drove us all here, and you guys still have to find out why R is here."

"She said she needed some air," Emma told him, shaking her head. "Maybe we should just give her a few minutes to cool down."

"No, you should go talk to her now," Henry urged. "You know the longer you wait, the more time she'll have to stew in it and then she'll just build up

a grudge against you."

Emma chuckled. "You make a fair point there, Henry. Okay, I'll be back in a minute."

"Take your time," Henry said, waving her off, which Emma thought was a bit curious but didn't question. Instead, she nodded and then turned to R. She walked over and gently placed her hands on the teen's shoulders. "I promise we can talk about this later," she told her. "I know you have a lot of questions, and we haven't been great about answering them. So, later, okay?"

R sighed and nodded. "Very well," she whispered. She was surprised by the sudden press of Emma's lips against her forehead and the warmth that followed, spreading through her heart. But then Emma was gone, running out of the shop after a Regina that R was beginning to feel like she could never grow to be.

When Emma stepped outside, she was a bit surprised to find that Regina was nowhere in sight. She stepped over to Regina's waiting car and glanced inside. "No queen here," she muttered. She walked over to the side of Gold's building and peered into the alley. "No queen there." When she stepped back out, she looked up and down the street before letting out a frustrated sigh. "No queen anywhere."

Emma didn't have a clue which direction to go. Regina could have poofed herself elsewhere for all she knew. She glanced down at her cell phone, momentarily contemplating calling the woman, but she was ninety-nine percent sure that Regina wouldn't answer her calls in that moment. She wasn't about to just give up and go back into the shop, though. Finding people was her thing after all.

"Left or right. Left or right. Left or right." She repeated the chant over and over in her head, her eyes closed and squinted with her determination to choose the right direction. After a moment, she opened her eyes and breathed, "Right," before taking off in that direction. She only took about three running steps, though, before she felt a sharp tug in her chest.

She stopped as soon as she felt it, a pull on her heart like some invisible force was trying to physically turn her around. She rubbed unconsciously at the spot over her heart as she turned without thinking and took off the other way. "No," she whispered to herself. "Left. Definitely left."

She ran all the way down to the docks, which thankfully weren't terribly far from Gold's place, and a small smile spread over her lips as she saw Regina's thick, dark hair and perfect posture occupying the same bench she had sat upon when questioning Emma about Neal's presence in Storybrooke. God, that seemed like forever ago.

Emma said nothing as she walked up and dropped onto the bench directly beside the one Regina occupied. They didn't acknowledge one another for a long time, both simply staring off into the vast reach of the ocean. But then Emma heard Regina shift, and she turned to see the brunette now facing her.

"I shouldn't have snapped at you," Regina said quietly, her expression pained but sincere.

Emma nodded. "I shouldn't have snapped at you either."

They stared at one another for a long, silent moment before Regina whispered, "You don't understand how this feels."

"You're right," Emma agreed. "I don't understand. I can't even imagine how you must feel having her here, and I shouldn't have said the things I did. I shouldn't have assumed. I was just trying to—"

"Make it better," Regina finished quietly for her.

Emma sighed. "Yeah," she whispered, nodding. "I know I don't know *all* of the details of your past, Regina, and I'm not asking you to tell me, but I *do* know that it sucked. You had it rough, and I...I know what that feels like, to have a past you wish you could forget or change or fix somehow. So, I just wanted to make it better. I know we can't change your past because it would change everything about our lives now, and we've got it pretty good, you know? But I just thought that maybe we could let her believe for a little while that everything wasn't on the verge of falling apart for her."

Regina nodded. "But what happens when she returns to find this beautiful past you painted for her was nothing but a lie? It will crush her, Emma, and I...*she* already has nothing but pain to look forward to."

"I don't know," Emma whispered, shaking her head. "I don't know, Regina, but she has so many questions, and I don't think I can handle telling her the truth about what will happen to her. I don't think you want to have to do that to her either."

"No, I don't," Regina agreed, and Emma reached out to wipe away a single tear that had slipped free from the brunette's dark lashes. "I don't know what to do."

"Neither do I," Emma told her. "But at least we're in this together."

Regina stared at her for a long moment before whispering, "Why do you care so much about her?"

Emma smiled tenderly. "She's you, Regina," she answered, shrugging. "You always talk about her like she's foreign to you."

Regina swallowed painfully. "She is," she whispered. "She *is* foreign to me. She *feels* foreign to me. I look at her and I remember being that sweet, naïve, innocent girl, but it feels more like a dream than a memory; hazy and surreal and so far from who I now am that there is no possible way she could be real."

"But she *is* real, Regina," Emma replied softly. "She *is* a memory, but more than that, she's still a part of you."

Regina's brows furrowed as she shook her head. "No," she whispered sadly. "No, Emma. She isn't a part of me. I killed all that she was long ago."

"That's what you *think*," Emma told her, "but I *know* better. I've seen her in you, in the way you look at Henry and care for him and love him. Meeting her and getting to know her has really only strengthened that knowledge. She is still a part of you, Regina, and she deserves to be loved."

Regina started to respond, but Emma cut her off. She held Regina's gaze as she added, "Just like you do."

***Chapter 16*: Chapter 16**

Chapter Sixteen

Regina's gaze snapped up and locked onto Emma's. "Emma," she said, almost breathlessly. They stared at one another a long moment, Emma taking in Regina's awed expression and Regina taking in Emma's subtle smile, and then Regina quietly asked, "What *is* this?"

Emma blinked once, twice, and then sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Really?" she drawled.

Regina's brows furrowed. "What?"

"I was just being totally sweet and romantic, and you ruined it with a question," Emma replied with a roll of her eyes.

"*Romantic?*" Regina asked sharply. "Are you saying that you were actually *aiming* to be romantic just now? With *me*? The Evil Queen?"

"I'm saying that if I *was* aiming to be romantic, it was a wasted effort, because you totally killed the mood."

"The *mood*?" Regina blurted. "I ruined 'the mood'? The mood I wasn't even aware existed until you mentioned as much?"

"Oh please, Regina," Emma deadpanned. "Don't act like you weren't aware of the mood."

"What *is* this?" Regina asked again, both wanting Emma to give her a real, solid answer and wanting to remain ignorant. Then again, Regina wasn't entirely sure that she was as ignorant as she was acting. The steady pounding beneath her ribs and the fluttering in her gut certainly said she wasn't.

"What is *what*, Regina?" Emma asked despite knowing exactly what Regina was referencing.

"*This*," Regina repeated, using her index finger to motion back and forth between herself and Emma. "Whatever this is that you are doing, that we are doing. You try to comfort my past. You crawl into my bed and tell me the ways we fit. You're suddenly openly complimenting my body. We are civil with one another, Emma, and at times, even true friends, but now you are changing the game. Why? What is this?"

"When are you going to stop asking me impossible questions?" Emma asked her, swiping a hand down her face. "*What is this? What are we doing? Why do you care?*"

"So, I can't ask questions now?" Regina snapped, crossing her arms tightly over her chest. Her gaze turned hard as she kept it fixed on the blonde.

Emma shook her head gently and laughed. She rose to her feet and began a slow pacing in front of the benches. "I don't get why you can't just accept something for what it is. Why can't you just let things happen, Regina?"

"Why can't you just put a name to it?" Regina countered bitterly, arching a brow at the pacing woman. "Why is it that *I* am the one who always needs to compromise? *You* want things to happen naturally. *I* want to be prepared. Excuse me if the life I've lived has made me lose my taste for surprises."

"Fine!" Emma snapped, turning to face the woman on the bench. "Fine, Regina. You want to talk about it? That's what you want? Fine. We'll talk about it."

Regina opened her mouth to respond, but Emma put a hand up to stop her. "*But*," the blonde continued, "not now. We have stuff we have to figure out first, and Henry and R are waiting for us back at Gold's. So, we're going to go deal with that first. We can talk about *this* later."

"So now you're the boss?" Regina asked, knowing she was being immature and petty, but she couldn't help herself. Anytime someone else pulled the reins from her hands, she lashed out. The lack of control made her feel insecure. It also didn't help that she and Emma Swan were but a breath away from completely exploding on one another, and Regina didn't know if

that explosion would lead to utter destruction or allow them to rebuild their relationship into something possibly altogether better and more beautiful.

"Oh no, Regina," Emma bit out, "you've made it perfectly clear that things are definitely not going to go my way. Now, let's go."

Regina worked her jaw angrily even as her chest flooded with guilt before she rose to her feet, straightened her spine, and reluctantly followed Emma without a word.

Gold stared at R for several long moments, simply taking in the sight of her. It felt as if centuries had passed since he had last seen *this* Regina, the one with the bright eyes. He remembered watching from the shadows, through crystal balls, through enchanted mirrors. He remembered watching her grow. He remembered those bright eyes turning desperate. He remembered the first time she had ever called his name. He remembered turning those desperate eyes dark. He remembered every moment. Each one flashed through his mind every time he came face to face with the Regina of this world, the one he had molded so long ago.

He could never forget the things he had done to her. Even if he couldn't regret them, he also couldn't forget. He couldn't forgive himself.

It was yet another burden he had to live with.

"Uh, Grandpa?"

Henry's voice pulled Gold back to reality, the man blinking rapidly and turning to look at his grandson. Henry's expression was pure confusion. "Are you alright?" he asked, and Gold nodded without answering. "You sure?" Henry pressed. "Because you kind of zoned out there for a minute."

Gold offered Henry a tight smile. "I'm fine, Henry," he told the boy before turning his gaze back to R.

The teen was obviously intimidated by him, perhaps even frightened. He could see it, *feel* it radiating off of her. This Regina still wore her emotions

on her sleeve. Everything that she felt haloed around her like a bright, colorful aura.

"Are you frightened of me, dearie?" Gold asked quietly as he took a few slinking steps toward her, his cane tapping gently against the shop floor.

R took as many steps back as Gold took forward, her gaze never leaving his. She shook her head slowly back and forth.

Gold smirked and a quiet chuckle escaped him. "Now, now," he said, "there's no need to lie."

R chewed on her bottom lip and took yet another step back so that her calves smacked into an antique trunk and she stumbled.

"And," Gold continued, a small smile playing at his lips, "there is also no reason to be afraid."

"Why do I not believe you?" R asked, having steadied herself and stepped to the side of the trunk. "Who are you?"

"Why, I'm the owner of this lovely establishment, of course," Gold told her, flicking a wrist in the air, "and I am also perhaps the only person who can help you return to your time."

"Yeah, R," Henry chimed in, walking around his grandfather to stand next to his mother's younger self, "he can help us. You don't have to be scared. He used to be a bad guy but he's not anymore, so there's nothing to be afraid of."

Those words only increased R's unease. She reached out and wrapped a hand around Henry's forearm, pulling him a bit closer to her. Henry didn't know if she was pulling him close because she was scared or because she was trying to protect him; either way, he was happy to stand beside her. He just wished he could somehow convince her that it was okay to trust Gold. The man was dodgy, for sure, but he'd been on the path to redemption for quite some time now, and Henry believed he could remain on that path. He hoped he would.

"Henry," she said quietly, "who is this man?"

"His name is R—"

"Mr. Gold," Gold interrupted quickly, locking eyes with his grandson and giving a subtle shake of his head. The less R knew of whom he was, the better. She would find out soon enough anyhow once returned to her time, and that was the way it was meant to be. "My name is Mr. Gold."

"Mr. Gold," the teen repeated softly.

"Indeed," Gold told her. He tilted his head forward an inch or two as if to say it was a pleasure to meet her. Perhaps it was, meeting her all over again.

Before R could respond, the door of the shop jerked open, the bell jingling overhead, and in walked Emma and Regina. Henry was disappointed to see that both his mothers looked hard-faced and angry, anything but on the verge of admitting they loved one another.

Regina's gaze tracked back and forth between Gold and her younger self. "What's going on here?" she asked sharply.

Gold looked up at her then, the barest hint of a smile dancing on his lips. "Oh nothing, dearie," he told her. "We were just getting better acquainted."

Regina arched a brow at him before sneering. Before she could reply, though, Emma chimed in with a hard, "Well *don't*, unless you want to get better acquainted with my fist." She stepped over in front of R, mostly blocking her from view, and crossed her arms over her chest.

Regina could hardly help the smile that tugged at the corners of her lips despite how annoyed she was with the Sheriff. She quickly schooled her features, though, and nodded firmly. "You can talk to *us*."

"Such hostility," Gold teased, smirking.

"Such history," Emma drawled. "Much wickedness. Big jerk." She then rolled her eyes and asked, "Can we move on now then?"

Regina snorted, her arms crossed over her chest in a mirror of Emma's, and she spared a glance to her son who was grinning despite trying not to. "Yes, dear," she agreed, turning back to Gold, "let's move on."

Gold chuckled lightly. "I think you both know I am going to have to talk to the girl," he told them, and Regina sighed.

"Fine," she bit out. "Let's just get this over with."

"And she just popped out of the air," Emma told Gold just as she had told Regina the day before. "Literally, *right out of the air*. It was like the sky unzipped for a second and just spit her out or something."

"Quite the description there, Sheriff," Gold replied, and Emma just gave him her usual deadpan stare that she hoped wordlessly communicated how little she cared for his sarcasm.

"Well, that's what happened," she said after a moment, shrugging. "You asked, and I answered."

Gold nodded. "Of course," he said smoothly, "but there were no colors in the air? No glimmering or shimmering? Any strange smells perhaps?"

Emma's brows furrowed as she contemplated that for a moment. She closed her eyes and did her best to recall the moment when R had come crashing out of the sky and barreling into her. It had all happened so quickly that she doubted she would have noticed any colors in the air even if they *had* been there. Smells, though. That was a bit different.

"I don't remember any colors," she told Gold, shaking her head, "but then she pretty much fell right on top of me, so I could've just missed them if they were there."

"I see."

"Now that you mention smells, though," she continued, and both Gold and Regina perked up. Henry and R stood silently behind Regina, just listening

and waiting for someone to have an a-ha moment that could lead to some significant discovery. "I think I remember something smelling like... cinnamon, maybe? Or nutmeg? I figured it was just because I wasn't too far from Granny's, but do you think it could've been because of the ripple thing?"

As soon as the mention of the spices escaped Emma's lips, Gold's and Regina's eyes locked hard.

"What?" Emma asked, catching the knowing glance. "Is cinnamon important? Know any ripple makers who like to bake or something?" She snorted at her own humor, but neither Gold nor Regina spared her a glance, so she sighed. "Oh, come on. You guys are boring."

Gold finally turned to look at Emma then and said, "There is no such thing as a 'ripple maker', Miss Swan. The *existence* of ripples in time is not rare. It is the *discovery* of them that is the rarity. You see, one cannot *create* a ripple in time. One can, however, *find* one and magically force it open in order to use it."

"So, you're saying that there are random invisible time portals just sitting around everywhere that people could just stumble into?" Emma asked, her expression nothing short of positively bewildered.

"Cool!" Henry exclaimed from behind her.

"No, Miss Swan," Regina interjected, ignoring the glare from Emma at the use of the formal address, "one cannot simply stumble *into* a time ripple. They exist everywhere, but they can only be opened and accessed by a powerful source of magic."

"And it is anything but cool," she added, glancing to her son. "Messing with time is terribly dangerous and can have disastrous outcomes."

"Indeed," Gold agreed. "It is considered a foul form of magic, that which meddles with time."

"But then why are these ripples just sitting around everywhere then?" Emma asked him. "Why even tempt people?"

Gold sighed. "It is beyond any one person's control," he replied. "Ripples are a by-product of chance, a representation of flaws in the grand design."

"The grand design? Flaws? By-products of chance?" Emma repeated back to him. She then shook her head. "I'm so confused."

"And I unfortunately lack the patience to explain it all to you," Gold told her.

Emma glared at him. "Well, I don't care what you have the patience for. *Explain.*"

Regina placed a hand on Emma's arm without thinking, a comforting touch to calm the woman. She could tell in that moment that Emma was overwhelmed. She was feeling a little overwhelmed herself, but at least she knew enough of magic to understand what Gold was telling them. Emma, on the other hand, didn't seem to be able to wrap her head around it so easily.

"The grand design," she told the blonde, "is the design of the universe, the laws by which each species exists and operates here."

"Precisely," Gold said, "and flaws occur when one's choices do not align with one's original fate. When that happens, a ripple in time is created. The ripple contains the fate that was cheated and preserves it. Fate then molds itself to the choice made and creates a new destined path for the one in question."

"Whoa," Henry said in awe. "So people can literally change their fates?"

"Oh yes," Gold answered. "It happens all the time."

"But then how would anyone ever truly know what was fate and what was not?" R suddenly chimed in, too intrigued to remain silent.

Gold smiled softly at her. "All is fate, dearie," he told her. "All that you do and don't do. All that you run from and all that you run toward. Each act is an act of fate, whether pre-destined or created by one's own will. What is chosen *for* you is fate as is what you choose for yourself. Wherever you end up is fate, whether fated by the grand design or fated by your own choices. It is simply the way of the universe."

Emma's eyes glazed over as she listened to Gold, and then she let out a long, heavy sigh that bordered on a groan. "Well, the universe's existential b.s. is giving me a headache," she grumbled once he finished, and Regina smirked.

"You are not alone, dear," she said, nodding, and Emma smiled at her before she could stop herself. When she realized that they were basically just grinning at one another while three other people stared at them, she quickly cleared her throat and turned back to Gold.

"So, what does any of this have to do with colors and cinnamon or whatever?"

Gold said nothing as his gaze flicked from Emma to Regina and then past them both to settle on R. "I'm going to need to speak with her."

Regina chewed her bottom lip for only a moment before turning to face her younger self. "R," she said softly, "come here, please."

The teen stepped forward, looking apprehensive. "Have I done something?" R asked worriedly.

"No, no," Regina replied, placing a hand on R's back and rubbing soothingly between her shoulder blades, "but Mr. Gold needs to ask you a few questions."

The last thing R wanted to do was talk to this man who gave her chills that simply refused to subside, but she knew that this was hardly the moment to let her discomfort get the better of her. So, she nodded her acceptance and turned to face the man.

"Dear," Gold began, "can you tell me what you remember about crossing over?"

"Nothing," R answered honestly. "I remember nothing. One moment, I was home, and the next, I was here. I remember nothing of the transition."

"And before?" he asked her. "Do you remember what you were doing prior to traveling through time?"

"I..." R hesitated, looking back and forth between Regina and Emma. "I was resting."

"Resting?" Gold asked her. "You were asleep?"

"No," she answered honestly. "I had yet to fall asleep. I was simply lying in my bed."

"Doing?" Gold pressed. "Thinking about?"

R's cheeks colored a soft pink. "Love," she answered in a whisper. "I was thinking about love."

***Chapter 17*: Chapter 17**

A/N: Just a quick note for any who are utterly confused by the magic of time ripples:

It is meant to feel and seem overwhelming with only certain aspects sticking out that click. Emma doesn't understand it either, and you are meant to learn about it primarily from Emma's perspective, someone who has very little experience with and understanding of magic.

There is definite logic to what has been explained, and some of you may follow along with it easily while others struggle to understand. That's perfectly fine. It is meant to be that way, and you don't need to fully understand the way ripples in time work in order for you to understand the flow of the plot and what is happening. That is the point. A ripple is something that's not supposed to be tampered with; therefore few people know anything about it or even really understand it all that well.

I hope that clears that up, and I hope you all enjoy this extra-long chapter to make up for the wait. Thank you for all the wonderful reviews and support. I greatly appreciate it. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Seventeen

R's cheeks colored a soft pink. "Love," she answered in a whisper. "I was thinking about love."

Emma's face scrunched in confusion as she glanced over to see R's slight blush, which was nothing compared to Regina's sudden tomato-face, and Gold's barely contained chuckle.

"I don't get it," Emma said after a moment. "Is that significant?"

"Oh dear," Gold laughed softly, smirking. "Oh dearie, dearie, dear. Fate does have an interesting sense of fun, doesn't she?"

Emma huffed out a sigh as she rolled her eyes. "And I have an interesting sense of 'what the hell is going on' over here, so maybe you could stop with the wicked cackle and help me out with that, hm?"

"I would hardly call that a wicked cackle," Gold countered, narrowing his eyes as if pondering it. "Impish chortle seems more accurate."

Emma blinked several times, just staring at the man. "Really?" she drawled. "You need a hobby."

"And you need to brush up on your evil laughter," Gold replied, smirking.

"Yeah, yeah." Emma waved a hand to dismiss the discussion. "Can we get back to the matter at hand?"

Gold nodded once. "Of course."

Emma glanced over at Regina to see that the other woman had yet to move. In fact, it looked she hadn't even bothered to breathe since R had uttered the word 'love'. Emma was a little worried that if the brunette might transform from a tomato into a blueberry if she didn't breathe soon. "Regina?" she said softly.

Regina looked up then, her eyes deep and what Emma could define as fearful, but there was something else in them. Something like... wonderment, like clarity. It made Emma breathless.

"What is it?" the blonde whispered.

Regina stared at her only a moment longer before swallowing thickly, clearing her throat, and turning back to Gold. "Is it really possible that she could have opened the ripple herself?"

Gold smiled. "You and I both know the power you possess, Regina, and the scent of nutmeg is the clear signature of your brand."

"Whoa, really?" Emma asked, butting in. "So *that's* why it always smells like cinnamon, or nutmeg whatever, when you do the poof thing?"

"Yes, but," Regina protested to Gold, completely ignoring the blonde, "R is only sixteen. That was before I even began to practice magic."

R's eyes widened at that. "Magic?" she whispered to herself, her tone a mixture of confusion and fear. "I have magic?"

Emma squeezed her shoulder in response, a silent promise that they would talk about it soon, but right now she needed to focus. She needed to understand the gravity of whatever it was they were in the process of discovering, whatever this strange understanding was that seemed to be thickening the air between Regina and Gold.

"Indeed," Gold replied, "but magic has always been a part of you. It lived in your cells from the moment you were conceived. An immense burst of emotion or a truly desperate wish could have caused you to tap into that magic even without proper training. You wished for love, and your magic responded."

"But what about the ripple?" Emma asked. "I get that R could've opened it accidentally, but you said that ripples were meant to contain a cheated fate. So, how did she end up *here*?"

"Ah," Gold said, nodding and tapping his fingers atop his cane. "That is where things get a bit tricky, Miss Swan. Yes, ripples contain the course of a cheated fate when left untouched. They are not meant to be opened, and can only properly be opened to access said cheated fate by fate itself."

"Seriously?" Emma asked, sighing. "Can you even *hear* yourself right now? Did any of that make any sense at all?"

Gold chuckled. "I told you it was tricky, dear."

"Yeah, you weren't kidding," Emma replied, shaking her head. "So, the cheated fate can't be accessed if opened by anyone other than fate?"

"That is correct," Gold told her. "If forced open by *another*, a ripple simply becomes an untamed portal."

"Untamed," Emma repeated quietly. "Regina's spellbook thingy said that ripples are unstable."

"Exactly." Gold nodded. "Time ripples are unstable because they are untamed. They have no structure. They can move in any direction through time. If a person were to step into a ripple without a very clear idea in mind, said person could end up quite literally anywhere on the timeline of existence."

"So, the person's thoughts or what, *desires* or something, controls where they actually end up?" Emma asked.

"No." Emma was surprised to hear that it was Regina who responded to her then. The brunette's eyes seemed so haunted as she looked up at Emma and in a whisper said, "Fate controls where you end up, but is directed by whatever it is the person most wants or needs in that moment."

Emma stared at her for a long moment, just trying to wrap her mind around everything she had learned in the last few hours. She ran over as much of it as she could remember in her mind, over and over and over, and the silence seemed to stretch on forever as she stared into Regina's eyes. It was as if the woman was pleading for her to understand, and then suddenly, it began to click. It began to sink in. It began to pound in Emma's chest like a war drum.

Fate controls where you end up, but is directed by whatever it is the person most wants or needs in that moment.

Green eyes widened as Emma breathed sharply through her nose and turned to look at R. "You were thinking about love," Emma whispered, her throat suddenly feeling tight and scratchy.

R nodded gently. "True Love," she replied quietly, shyly, "yes."

Gold agreed to visit and investigate the scene where R had come through the ripple. He also spent a bit of time with Regina, discussing the making of a memory potion that R would need to take prior to returning to her time.

Regina had been obviously confused and visibly angry when Gold informed her that it would take him at least two full days to brew the potion, a potion that Regina argued she, herself, could make in two hours as opposed to two days. Gold had informed her that it was best he make it himself, and Regina had scoffed at him before turning and marching out of the shop without a word to the others.

Emma had patted R on the back and led her toward the door as well. Henry trailed behind, grinning at the wink his grandfather offered him, before following his family to the car.

The car ride was incredibly quiet and astoundingly tense. Regina's grip on the steering wheel had her knuckles painted chalk white, but Emma did her best to keep quiet and not comment on it. She was afraid a single sound might cause the woman to explode.

So, Emma remained quiet; that is, until they returned home.

Henry was the first to break the silence. "So, can we have pizza for dinner?" he asked as they entered the mansion, one by one.

R's brows furrowed, but she said nothing. She had been silent for such a long while now, unsure of whether or not she should speak. She had so many questions, but it always seemed like the wrong time to ask, and she was afraid of upsetting her future self, or worse, *Emma*.

But Emma had promised her that she would get the answers she sought, so R held onto that promise, and she hoped it would be fulfilled soon.

"Sounds good to me," Emma replied, "but uh, Regina, don't you think you and I should talk first?"

"Henry," Regina replied in a sigh as she slipped off her heels and made her way toward the kitchen, completely ignoring Emma's question.

"Please, Mom," Henry begged, running after her. "R should get to experience pizza before she goes back."

Emma and R stood next to one another in the foyer still, silent and listening to the other two go on. Emma looked over at R and smiled before bringing her arm up to rest it around the teen's shoulders. When R blushed and smiled softly, Emma chuckled.

"You really should try pizza," the blonde said, squeezing R's shoulders.

"If that is what you wish," R replied softly, "then I suppose I would quite like to, yes."

"Good," Emma told her, "because it's one of my favorites."

R beamed. "Then I am sure I will love it as well."

Emma started to lead the teen toward the kitchen, but R tugged on Emma's hand as it rested on her shoulder. "Emma..." she whispered, looking into the blonde's eyes with such pleading that it made Emma's heart ache in her chest.

"I know," Emma sighed. "I know you're confused and maybe even a little scared, and if I'm being honest, I am too, but we *will* talk about it. Okay? We will. I just need to talk to Regina first, because she and I need to work through a few things, and it's probably better if she's the one who talks to you about all this magic stuff, R. I don't really understand it well enough to explain, so it needs to be her."

R offered her a tender smile in understanding. "Very well." She then let Emma lead her into the kitchen where Henry and Regina were debating whether or not pizza actually qualified as junk food.

"It is junk, Henry," Regina told him. "We have gone over this dozens of times."

"True, but you never *really* give my argument a second thought," Henry countered. "I'm just saying...it's debatable."

"I agree with the kid," Emma chimed in. "Also, about that talk, Regina? We should probably have that. Preferably soon."

Regina looked up at her with a hard glare, and it only intensified when she saw that Emma had entered the kitchen with R tucked snugly under her arm. She huffed as she crossed her arms over her chest and said, "Fine." She turned back to her son. "You have thirty seconds to argue your point. Go."

Henry nodded and then jumped right in. "Pizza doesn't have to be all carbs and grease," he told her in his best professional-speaker voice, a voice that made Emma and R both chuckle. Emma could see, too, the way it made Regina's lips quirk up at the corners. "It can be healthy if one opts to make it so, while still being delicious. It can fulfil the body's needs of several food groups. There's bread. There's cheese, which is dairy. You can top it with a variety of meats and vegetables both. You can even put pineapples on it, so there's your fruit, or if you don't like pineapples, one could argue that the fruit category is covered by the tomato sauce on the pizza. Tomatoes are fruits, after all, regardless of what *some* people think. So, in conclusion, I say that pizza is actually a rather healthy dinner choice that manages to satisfy multiple needs all at once."

He sucked in a much-needed breath as soon as his fast-paced speech ended, and Emma cracked up as she gave him a standing ovation. "I agree with the kid," she said again, and Regina just rolled her eyes.

"Fine," she agreed. "You've won your pizza, Henry."

"Yes!" Henry cheered.

Emma squeezed R's shoulder before letting go and moving over to high-five her son. They slapped palms, and then Emma stepped around the island to where Regina was standing. "So, that talk?"

"Emma, must you be so insistent?" Regina asked in a sharp whisper that everyone in the room heard.

"Yeah, I really must," Emma replied quietly, "because we *need* to have that talk. You wanted to talk about it, so we're going to talk about it."

Regina avoided her gaze. "Now is not the time."

"No time is *the* time," Emma told her. "We're just going to have to *make* the time, and I'm making it right now."

"Uh..." Henry said, watching the exchange. He grabbed R's hand and pulled her toward the living room. "Let's just go in here for a little bit."

Emma and Regina turned to watch them slip out of the room. Once they were gone, Regina sighed and shook her head. "Not here," she snapped before crossing the kitchen and stepping out the patio door and into the backyard.

Emma took a deep breath and followed.

Emma stepped outside and slid the door closed behind her. Regina was out in the middle of the yard, her back to Emma, and her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Emma's pulse began to race as she neared her.

This talk they were about to have...it had the potential to change everything.

"So," Emma said, stopping a few paces behind Regina and kicking her toe against the grass absentmindedly, "where do we start?"

Regina chuckled bitterly. "You insist we talk yet you have no idea of what you actually want to say?" the brunette drawled, keeping her back to Emma. "Your idiocy constantly astounds me."

Emma bit the inside of her cheek to keep herself from snapping. She took a deep breath and then quietly said, "Don't do that."

Regina whirled on her then. "Excuse me?"

"Don't *do* that," Emma repeated, locking gazes with the woman. She could tell Regina was itching to lash out at her, at anyone. The brunette was wired with the stress of everything that had occurred in the last two days and everything that they had learned in the last few hours. She was feeling trapped or perhaps just overwhelmed. Either way, Emma knew it was just

Regina's way of dealing with things—lashing out so that she didn't have to show how vulnerable she felt; didn't have to show how she really felt at all.

"Don't do *what*?" Regina growled at her, moving into Emma's space.

Emma held her stance and Regina's gaze. "Don't belittle me just so that you can deflect. Don't insult me just because you are too afraid to talk about what we're doing."

"What we're doing?" Regina spat back at her, laughing coldly. "What *we're* doing? No, Miss Swan. *We* aren't doing anything. *You* are doing it all. You are the one behaving differently. I've done nothing. I am *doing* nothing."

"No," Emma snapped, cutting Regina off. "No, you don't get to shove everything off on me and pretend like I'm the only one in this."

"In wha—" Regina began, but Emma quickly cut her off again.

"You don't get to act like I'm the only one who *feels* this way."

"Excuse me?!"

"You don't get to pick apart my actions and blame me for this shift between us," Emma went on.

"I haven't blamed you for anything!" Regina exclaimed, breaking their heated stare to look elsewhere, *anywhere* but at Emma's hauntingly honest eyes. She cradled a hand over her stomach as things she never wanted to feel but at the same time wanted to feel more than *anything* began to prick at her heart and stir in her gut. This was too much.

"Are you kidding me right now?" Emma laughed out bitterly. "Really Regina? You blame me for *everything*. Every time something doesn't go according to plan, you blame me. It's always something I did or said or didn't do or didn't say. It's always me. Hell, you blamed me today."

Regina kept her gaze averted but her chin high. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You said I was changing the game!" Emma fired off, swiping a hand through her hair, her fingers snagging on a few tangles. "That's what you said, that *I'm* changing the game between us."

Regina chewed on her lip angrily and spoke through gritted teeth. "Well, yes, I did say that, but—"

"But I'm not," Emma argued, refusing to let her finish. She began to pace without even really realizing it, throwing her hand up to gesture in Regina's direction while stopping to face the woman every few seconds before beginning to pace again. "This so-called 'game', Regina? We've been playing it for *years*, same moves, same rules, and we're *still* playing it. We're still on this ridiculous merry-go-round that we never talk about and we never get off. We just keep going around and around and around. *I* haven't changed a damn thing."

"But—"

"But nothing," Emma cut her off again, finally stopping to fully face the brunette. "You want to know who changed the game, Regina?" Emma's eyes were emerald flames as she stepped closer and jabbed her index finger toward Regina's chest. "You did. *You* changed the game."

Regina's brows shot up toward her hairline. "What the hell are you—"

"You changed the game the minute you opened that ripple."

"*I did not* open the ripple!" Regina countered angrily.

"Yes you did!" Emma snapped back. "Yes, Regina, you did. It may not have been *you* you, but it was still you. You laid in your bed, and you thought about love, and you wanted it so badly that you tapped into your magic, and you opened a fucking *time portal*."

Regina's heart pounded heavily in her chest. "No, I—"

"A time portal that brought you to *me*," Emma carried on, rolling right over Regina's feeble attempt at denial. She stepped in even closer to the brunette,

her chest heaving with her shallow breathing. "You thought about *love*, Regina, and then you ripped open the world and brought yourself to *me*."

Regina's chest burned. Her throat burned. Her eyes burned. Every part of her burned with Emma's words. She was on fire with the truth in them, with the power that that truth possessed to bend their reality and reshape it entirely.

"Do you *hear* me, Regina?" Emma asked, reaching out to wrap her hands around the brunette's shoulders. When Regina finally looked up and met her gaze, Emma lowered her voice to a whisper. "*You* did that. *You* changed the game. All I've done is roll with it. I *chose* to roll with it. I chose to stop being afraid."

Regina's voice cracked as she lost herself in Emma's gaze and asked, "Afraid of me?"

Emma's shoulders slumped as she shook her head gently and smiled at Regina. "Of us," she answered, squeezing the woman's arms. "I chose to stop being afraid of all the things we've been saying to one another for years. We never said those things out loud, but we said them with our eyes, didn't we? We said them every time we chose to get along, every time we worked together, every time we chose to help one another. We said them every time we trusted one another. We never stopped saying those things in silence, Regina. I just chose to stop being afraid of saying them out loud."

"But you haven't said anything," Regina choked out, her eyes glossy in the fading sunlight. "Nothing concrete. Nothing that makes any sense to me."

"Because you have to have things all laid out for you," Emma replied, nodding. "Yeah, you made that perfectly clear today at the dock, Regina. You want to know. You want to be prepared. You can't just let things happen how they happen."

Regina shook in Emma's hands. This was too much, and Emma...she was confused. She was caught up in everything that was happening, and she wasn't thinking clearly. That was it. That was all.

Except that Regina so intimately knew that it wasn't. Still, she strained against it. That was simply her way.

She pushed Emma's arms away, her eyes going hard again. "You're just confused, Emma," Regina bit out. "You think you feel things for me, but you don't. You think you want me, but you don't. You think—"

"I think you love me," Emma told her, and Regina's breath slammed from her lungs.

***Chapter 18*: Chapter 18**

A/N: Thank you everyone for the continued support for this story. We are nearing the end of this story, but I hope you will all enjoy the few remaining chapters. The next chapter will focus primarily on young Regina, just to give you an idea of what's to come. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Eighteen

"What?" she rasped, a hand coming up to rest over her heart. "You *what*?"

Emma smiled softly at her, green eyes swimming with tears. "I think you love me, Regina. I think you've loved me for years. I think you're *going to* love me for even longer. I think you fucking *love* me, and you're just too scared to say it."

Regina's mouth moved wordlessly, opening and closing several times as the woman fought for the right words to deny Emma's claim, but Emma shook her head and moved into her again.

They shared the same small space of air as Emma held Regina's gaze and whispered, "It's okay to be scared, but *I'm* not going to be anymore." She reached up and slipped a hand around the back of Regina's neck and pulled the woman a little closer.

Regina gasped, only an inch away from Emma's lips. She wanted to let herself fall through that minute distance. She wanted to let herself cave. She wanted so much in that moment that she could hardly breathe, but she was also wary. She was timid. She was afraid. She hated the vulnerability. She hated the doubt that her history had caused her to accept as a natural reaction to the tiniest bit of affection sent her way.

She'd been burned far too many times, and almost every time came after opening her heart, after choosing to trust someone with the most precious parts of herself.

Regina placed a hand on Emma's chest and pushed her back, just an inch or two. She swallowed thickly as she averted her gaze and stared intensely at the ground. "I'm sorry, Miss Swan," she choked out. "You are mistaken."

Without another word, she pushed away from Emma and took off toward the house, needing an escape like she needed air. Emma threw up her hands as she watched Regina run away. "Bullshit!" she yelled after the woman, but Regina didn't turn back. She didn't say anything, simply disappearing inside the house.

Emma growled out her frustration, punching the air and kicking the ground before simply hanging her head and collapsing against the nearest tree. The grass felt springy beneath her fingertips as her hands coiled into fists and then relaxed, an action she repeated over and over until her breathing slowed and deepened again.

Part of her thought maybe it would be best if she just stayed out there until everyone inside went off to bed. Another part of her thought perhaps it would be best to give Regina some space, let the other woman calm down, and then maybe try again. Yet another part of her thought that if she let this go, if she *didn't* go after Regina right then, then the next time she tried to broach this subject, she would find herself on the outside of some very high, very thick walls.

Emma shook her head as she let out a long sigh and pressed her fingertips to her temples. She rubbed in a smooth circle, hoping to calm the chaos swirling in her mind. Go after her or don't go after her. Go after her or don't go after her. Go after her.

Jumping to her feet, Emma took a deep breath and headed inside. She was fairly certain that no one had ever bothered to go after Regina before, to show her that she was worth fighting for, even when she was afraid and perhaps a little mean. Emma wasn't going to make the mistake of being yet another person to let Regina down.

Emma stepped into the kitchen, the words already spilling from her mouth before she even bothered to assess the scene before her. "Regina, you can't

just walk away in the middle of a discussion. I'm trying to tell you that I— oh, um...oops."

Her cheeks turned red as she took in the confused expressions of Henry and R. Henry stared at her, his mouth poised over a slice of pizza. He slowly lowered the slice as he said, "Uh, pizza's here."

Chuckling awkwardly, Emma smiled and nodded. "I see that, kid." She swallowed the giant lump of awkwardness that had implanted in her throat as Henry and R gawked at her, and she tried not to wonder if they had heard any of what went on outside with Regina. She walked around the table and ruffled Henry's hair. "Were you just planning to eat it all without even telling your mom and me that it was here?"

Henry smiled guiltily. "In my defense, I didn't want to interrupt whatever was going on with you guys. It sounded pretty intense."

"Is everything well?" R asked, looking uneasy as she glanced up at Emma.

Emma bent and wrapped an arm around R's shoulders. "Hey," she said softly, "don't you worry, okay? Everything is fine. I promise."

She then poked Henry's shoulder and asked, "Where's your Mom, kid?"

"Upstairs, I think," Henry told her. He then shot her a borderline glare. "She seemed upset."

"Hey," Emma drawled, "save your glares for someone who actually deserves them."

"How do I know you don't?" he challenged, narrowing his eyes further even as he took a bite of his pizza slice.

Emma arched a brow. "How do you know I do?"

They stared at one another a long moment, both with their eyes narrowed and neither backing down until R cleared her throat and with amusement lacing her tone, she asked, "Is this normal?"

Emma laughed. "Not at all," she told the teen. "We're a weird family. You get used to it after a while, though." She reached down, picked up a slice of pizza from the open box, and took a big bite. "You learn to love us."

"Or you could *pretend* to love us, dear."

Everyone looked up, surprised to see Regina standing in the kitchen doorway. Framed by the soft light of the next room, she looked beautiful, but Emma could see the slight redness under Regina's eyes and the signs of mascara having been cleaned away, leaving the faintest smudges at the corners of conflicted brown eyes.

"Hi," Emma whispered, swallowing thickly and nearly choking when a chunk of pizza she'd forgotten was in her mouth shot down her esophagus. She coughed a few times, but she never took her eyes off Regina, who conversely was avoiding her gaze at all costs.

Regina completely ignored Emma's greeting and focused instead on R, who was smiling up at her.

"I have no need to pretend," R told her, laughing softly. "As strange as this kingdom and its customs are, I find I quite enjoy it, and I most certainly enjoy this family." She smiled almost shyly, her eyes shining with the brightest hope Regina had seen paint her face in decades. "*Our* family," R whispered.

Regina's eyes closed briefly at those words. She wanted to reject them, rage against them as adamantly as she raged against Emma's sudden spiraling confessions and the temptation to give in. She found, though, that she couldn't. She couldn't reject those words, not in that moment when she felt so raw and ragged that her truths danced painfully on her flesh, and the truth was that this really *was* her family. Emma and Henry...they were her family. Henry, of course, had always been, and Emma had sort of just wedged her way in. She'd blasted into their family and redefined it, and while she and Regina found new and thrilling ways to taunt one another nearly every day, Regina couldn't deny that when she thought of her family, it was no longer only Henry's face that swam through her mind. Emma's

was always there as well, aggravating the hell out of her in that annoyingly endearing way.

Whatever other truths she might be harboring in that moment could remain barely hidden beneath her trembling exterior, but *that* truth, no. That truth was undeniable.

Regina smiled tenderly at her younger self, but before she could reply, Emma's soft laughter drifted through the room. The blonde clapped R on the shoulder and teased, "So, I take it you're not upset anymore about ending up a lesbian?"

Henry choked on his pizza as he laughed. R's face turned as red as the pizza sauce. Emma grinned like an idiot, and Regina let out a long, exasperated sigh and pressed her fingertips to her forehead, slowly shaking her head back and forth.

"Miss Swan," she drawled, "honestly."

Emma's laughter increased, as did Henry's, before it caught and died in her throat when R quietly said, "Well, no, but I *do* have some questions, if it would be appropriate for me to ask."

Emma's eyes bugged and her gaze caught Regina's for only a moment, the brown eyes narrowed into a glare. She definitely wasn't prepared for this. R's little moments of boldness were even more surprising than Regina's little moments of kindness where Snow was concerned.

"Uh..." Emma quickly reached for a slice of pizza and all but shoved the end of it at R's lips. "Did you try the pizza yet? It'll change your life. Eat it."

Regina continued to shake her head back and forth as R startled before slowly opening her mouth to take a small bite of the slice Emma pressed against her lips. She arched a brow at Emma as the blonde plastered on her best guilty expression.

They had an entire conversation with their eyes, something they frequently did without even realizing they were doing it.

Well, that's one way to change the subject, however ridiculous and rude.

I'm sorry, but hey, problem solved, yeah?

Shoving food down someone's throat isn't solving a problem. It is merely delaying it.

Uh...same thing?

You are an idiot.

Yeah, but...okay, yeah.

Regina kissed Henry's forehead and whispered goodnight. When she turned to leave the room, she was surprised to find the doorway empty. She expected to see Emma hovering there, but the blonde was entirely absent.

And then Regina's stomach plummeted. She knew exactly where she would find Emma.

She sucked in a sharp breath and made her way down to her bedroom. Sure enough, she found Emma Swan hovering inside, pacing near the end of Regina's bed. As soon as Regina stepped inside and closed the door behind her, Emma jumped into action.

"Regina, I—"

Regina quickly held up a hand to stop her. "No, Emma," she interrupted sharply. "No. You don't get to ambush me in my own bedroom, in my own home, and force me into yet another ridiculous, unfounded conversation."

"Ridiculous and unfounded?" Emma gaped at her. "You really think this is ridiculous and unfounded? Or are you just saying that because you think it'll make it easier to get me to drop it?"

Regina's jaw worked back and forth as she stared coldly at the blonde. "I don't love you," she said, doing her best to sound as firm as possible but silently cursing herself when she heard the slight tremble in her voice. She

cleared her throat and tried again. "I don't love you, and you don't love me, and this isn't going to be some epic story of true love and happy endings. That is not who we are, and that is not the relationship that we have."

"But it *could* be," Emma tried to argue, but Regina merely continued to shake her head.

"It *won't* be."

"Because you don't think it's *meant* to be," Emma asked, "or because you're too afraid to try?"

Regina's eyes began to sting, and she ground her teeth down together in an effort to keep any tears from rising. "I am not afraid."

"Yes you are," Emma snapped at her. "You're afraid, and you're lashing out. That's what you always do. You get freaked out and it makes you feel vulnerable, so then you get pissed off and you lash out. It's your thing, just like my thing is running away. I run away, because that's what I've always done to survive. Things get hard or scary or too intense or even just too emotional, I hit the ground running, and I don't look back."

Regina motioned to the door as she practically growled out her response. "Well, there's the door."

Emma shook her head. "But I'm not doing that this time. I'm not running. Hell, Regina, didn't I stop running when I met you? Even when I tried, I never got very far. Doesn't that mean something?"

"Emma," Regina sighed, surprised she was able to get any words out at all. Her throat felt so tight that her breathing felt strained. Emma's eyes were so deep, her voice so sincere, and Regina felt herself sinking, falling forward, falling in. "You have to stop this. You have to—"

"I'm in love with you."

Regina choked on her own saliva as those words fell right through Emma's lips with so little effort that they almost seemed destined. What startled her

more than the actual words, though, was Emma's expression. It wasn't twisted in shock. It wasn't contorted with confusion. It wasn't riddled with apprehension or fear. It was light. It was soft.

It was sure.

Emma's heart raced as she took a step forward, her entire body loose and liquid now that those words were finally out of her. She placed a hand over the thundering rhythm in her chest as she neared Regina. "Oh god, that felt good," she chuckled, "just to get that out. I...Regina, I love you."

Regina's head was already shaking back and forth as she backed away from Emma. She held a hand out in front of her to keep the blonde at arm's length, and then her back hit the door. She was trapped.

She felt those tears she had been fighting build without consent and burn in her eyes. She moved her mouth wordlessly for several seconds. Emma's confession had knocked the wind right out of her.

"You don't love me," she rasped once she finally caught her breath, a few tears slipping down her cheeks.

Emma chuckled. "I don't?"

"You *don't*, Emma," Regina repeated. "You may love the woman you *think* I can be. You may love the woman you think I *used to* be, but you don't love *me*. You're confused because of all that has happened, and because of R. You see her, and you adore her, and you think I can be her again, but I can't. You keep reminding me that she is still a part of me, and maybe you're right, but she is not the dominant part. She is merely a fraction of who I now am, and she will never be all of me. I've done too much. I've...*been* too much to go back now."

"You're wrong," Emma told her. "I'm not confused. I'm not hung up on some idea of you being something, *someone*, that you're not."

"But—"

Emma shook her head and took another step forward so that Regina's open palm, arm still extended forward, rested gently against her chest. "The reason I keep telling you that R is still a part of you is because *you* need to hear that. *You* need to know that. *You* need to have faith in yourself."

"What do you mean?" Regina whispered.

"I mean no matter how many times Henry or I tell you that you aren't evil, no matter how many times you prove that you're not some sociopath intent on destroying everyone, and no matter how much time goes by, you still continue to believe that you are a monster and a villain," Emma told her.

"Even if you never say it out loud anymore, you still *think* it. I can see it in your eyes. So, I've been trying to remind you that R is still a part of you not because *I* need to be reminded of it, but because *you* do. You need to believe that those good, pure parts of you still exist. And they do, but they're not the reason I love you."

Regina's eyes fluttered closed at the words. "Emma..."

"I don't need you to be sweet and innocent and perfect," Emma continued quietly, wrapping a hand around Regina's where it still rested atop the blonde's chest. "I told you before...I need someone who understands me, someone who has suffered and who understands suffering. I need someone who understands trauma and the way it stays with you your whole life. I need someone who gets that. I need someone who gets *me*."

Emma hesitated only a moment before tugging on Regina's hand and pulling the woman closer to her. Regina kept her head down, but she didn't resist. She allowed Emma to pull her closer, so close that she could feel the heat of the blonde's body, and then she felt Emma's hands timidly settle on her sides, thumbs caressing through the soft material of her shirt.

"Regina, I *love* that you're dark."

Regina's head snapped up at that. She locked onto Emma's gaze, her own questioning, searching for the truth in those words. It was there in Emma's eyes, bright and emerald.

Emma smiled softly at her. "I love that there are parts of you that can never be light again because of the awful things you've been through. That sounds terrible, but I think you get what I mean. There are parts of you that are so light and so pure, even if you can't see them, and I love those parts, but it's your dark spots that touch me the most. I have that darkness in me too, maybe not in the same ways, but it's there, and it will always be there."

"Emma," Regina whispered wetly, hesitantly lifting her other hand to rest it atop Emma's chest as well. Her fingertips splayed over Emma's collarbone, and she could feel the blonde's heartbeat thundering beneath the heel of her right palm. She could feel the walls around her own heart cracking and crumbling. She could feel her body melting, her reservations leaking away from her.

She wanted this.

"I love that feelings are difficult for you to process, because you feel twice as much as a regular person," Emma continued. "I love that overly happy people like my mom make you uncomfortable and maybe even a little sick to your stomach."

They laughed softly together, their cheeks wet and their gazes locked.

"I love that you're a complete asshole sometimes," Emma told her, and Regina rolled her eyes even as she laughed. "I love your sarcasm and your snark and your confidence and your intelligence. I love that you carry the weight of your entire life with you every day, Regina, because I do that too. I carry mine. I hate that you had to live through shitty things, but I love that you did, that you *did* survive, because I did, too. We're both survivors. We're the same. Don't you get that?"

Regina took a deep breath and nodded.

This was happening, even if it *was* too much. And it *was*. It was so much, too much, but it was also exactly what she needed.

"We are a mess," Regina whispered as she leaned into Emma, the space between them diminishing further.

Emma laughed softly and nodded, her forehead grazing against Regina's. "We are definitely a mess," she agreed. "We push at each other, and we pull at each other."

Regina's hand slipped slowly up from Emma's chest, creeping around the blonde's neck and tangling in Emma's hair. She nodded as she pulled Emma's face just a breath closer, their noses brushing and their breaths colliding. "We bicker," she whispered in a puff of air that Emma inhaled.

Emma's arms wrapped fully around Regina's body so that their hips pressed together, and Emma nodded against Regina's lips, both women gasping at the whispers of touch. "We've both got so much baggage that I'm surprised we can even function," she chuckled, and Regina felt the vibration of the sound against her teeth.

"We are a mess," the brunette repeated in barely audible whisper. She could feel her heart pounding beneath her ribs and in her hands and atop her tongue and between her legs.

Emma breathed sharply through her nose, Regina's scent washing through her and only increasing the near-painful tension in the base of her spine. "I'm a mess," she whispered, smiling against Regina's lips, "and you're a mess, Regina, and I love you."

She pressed a gentle kiss to Regina's cheek. It was feather-light and barely existent, but Regina felt it in her entire body. "Do you hear me?" Emma asked her, pressing another light kiss to the bridge of Regina's nose and another to her brow. "I." She pressed another kiss to Regina's jaw. "Love." Another kiss to Regina's fluttering lashes.

Regina's hands wrapped firmly around the blonde's cheeks and redirected her, swallowing Emma's final word in a searing kiss.

***Chapter 19*: Chapter 19**

A/N: Sorry about the delay on updates, everyone. I am on a deadline, so I've been working nonstop and have had very little time to devote to fanfiction. Thank you all for being patient and sticking with me. I appreciate that so much. There will only be two more chapters to this story. I hope you all enjoy this chapter. XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Nineteen

Regina's hands wrapped firmly around the blonde's cheeks and redirected her, swallowing Emma's final word in a searing kiss.

They slipped together, sparking in all the places their bodies met—lips and teeth and tongues and hands, breath and breath and breath. Regina's back bumped against the bedroom door, neither she nor Emma even realizing they'd moved. The hard press of the door against her back only made the soft press of Emma's body all the more intoxicating.

She melted against the wood as Emma dissolved into her, and suddenly she no longer knew whose touch was whose. Her eyes fluttered, rolled back, and clenched. Her hands slipped and slid and gripped and groped. Her lips sucked and pressed and parted to inhale every overwhelming breath taken from Emma's mouth, in the space between Emma's chin and chest, in the pocket of her clavicle, in the gaps between her fingers. Her body ached and bowed and shuddered and demanded more.

Regina thought she might drown in the sensations, wrapping around her and curling inside her and taking over.

Emma touched Regina with an eagerness that consumed her every motivation and movement. The moment they peaked, their lips brushing together for the first time, she felt that gentle press like an explosion devouring her insides and rippling across her flesh. She inhaled, sudden and

sharp, and pressed harder, feeding off the fire on Regina's lips and flickering between her fingers.

Emma felt Regina's hands on her chest, squeezing and palming her breasts through her shirt, before slipping down her stomach and gripping at her hips, curling into the waistband of her jeans. Heat coiled like a snake low in her abdomen until her body strained with the tension. Her spine bowed and she lurched forward, pressing into Regina's hands, aching for more.

Her body requested all the things lost on her tongue, and Regina seemed more than ready to give, to take, to let this moment drive them higher and higher and higher until nothing existed but sweat and salt and limited oxygen.

When Emma felt Regina's fingers slip under her shirt and skirt across her quivering stomach, she shuddered. Her eyes clamped shut. A guttural moan ripped its way up from her throat and she was surprised to feel Regina smile against her lips.

"Are we doing this?" Emma asked, a breathy question that turned wet as they kissed and kissed and fed off one another's rising need.

Regina felt the question vibrate down from her lips to her heart to the throb between her legs. She reveled in it, in the way Emma bucked and moaned beneath her touch. She opened her eyes just in time to see Emma open hers.

They locked gazes, just a moment, and Regina felt the truth in that stare. Everything between them from this moment on would change. There was no going back. There was only forward, and she wanted it more than she had let herself believe or even acknowledge for such an achingly long time.

She held Emma's gaze as she responded by pulling the blonde's shirt over her head. When it hit the floor, Regina's mouth pressed to Emma's chest, the flesh prickling beneath her kiss. She whispered against its heat.

"We're doing this."

Emma smiled as her heart raced beneath Regina's lips, as her hand came up to funnel through Regina's hair and the other braced them against the door.

When Regina slithered up and their mouths collided again, Emma pressed the woman fully against the door again and moved to undress her. She bit her lip at Regina's hazy gaze, the way her swollen lips and obsidian eyes made her look drunk with desire, and Emma imagined she looked much the same. It made her want nothing more than to drown with Regina in the heady wash of need and want and hunger, to please her so thoroughly that Regina would never want to come up for air.

But they jerked from the fire of their building frenzy when a knock echoed through the wood pressed against Regina's back.

"Regina?" called the voice from the other side, slicing through the haze of euphoria.

Emma breathed heavily against Regina's lips as they froze in place, hands still gripping flesh and clothes. "It's R," she whispered, and Regina nodded.

"Are you sleeping?" R timidly called through the door, need audible in her voice, and Regina felt a tug in her chest.

She dusted her fingertips over Emma's cheek and lips, communicating with her eyes and touch. "We should let her in."

Emma let out a heavy breath and nodded. "Yeah," she whispered. "Yeah, we promised we'd talk to her."

They shared a gentle, lingering kiss before Emma grabbed her shirt from the floor and moved to the bathroom to slip it back on while Regina ran a hand through her hair and turned to open the door.

R chewed her bottom lip, her fingers laced together in front of her body, when Regina opened the bedroom door. "Oh, I thought you might be sleeping," the teen said, surprised. "Have I woken you?"

Regina smiled tenderly at her younger self. She cleared her throat and shook her head. "No, no, dear," she assured, "it's fine. Did you need something?"

R shifted in place, rubbing the sock-covered toes of one foot against the hall floor. "No, I ... I was hoping ... I suppose it would be better to wait until morning. I apolo—"

"Regina." Regina paused as soon as the full name exited her mouth and then she chuckled. "That never stops being strange."

R giggled and nodded. "I know."

Regina waved a hand for R to enter. "Come in," she told the teen. "Whatever it is, it doesn't have to wait until morning."

R hesitated but then nodded and entered. She glanced at Regina again once inside the bedroom and noticed the visible tear tracks on the woman's cheeks illuminated now by the wash of the light. R worried her bottom lip as she reached up and grazed her fingers over Regina's cheek. "Has something happened?" she whispered. "You have been crying."

"Oh, I—" Regina started, unsure of what to say.

"Don't worry about that." Both brunettes turned to see Emma exiting the bathroom, smiling at R. "They're good tears."

"Good tears?" R questioned.

Emma walked up and put an arm around Regina's body, smiling when the woman actually leaned into her touch. "Oh yeah," she laughed. "I was just giving her some big romantic speech and next thing you know, waterworks. Such a softie."

R giggled again while Regina rolled her eyes and shook off Emma's arm. She motioned for R to have a seat on the bed and then sat down beside her. Emma pulled the chair from Regina's vanity over and plopped down into it.

"So, what's up, kiddo?" Emma asked, and R sighed.

She glanced to her older self. "I was hoping you could answer some of my questions. Emma promised you would, and I would have waited, but I—"

"Can't sleep?" Regina guessed, and R nodded.

Then, without warning, the teen's eyes began to well with tears. "I have magic," she whispered, gently shaking her head back and forth and glancing between her hands and Regina's saddened expression.

Emma felt her stomach knot. She hated it when people cried, especially Regina; any version of Regina. It made her entire body ache. "Hey, hey, R," she said softly, "it's okay. Magic isn't bad."

Regina locked gazes with Emma and sighed. "Most of the magic she has experienced in her life has been," she explained, and Emma felt her stomach knot even tighter. "Maybe I could have a moment alone with her, Emma?"

"Oh yeah, sure. I'm starving anyway." Emma jumped up and moved the vanity chair back to its proper place. "I'll go down to the kitchen."

"You ate four slices of pizza," Regina drawled and R chuckled through her tears.

"Yeah, I know," Emma said, "probably should've had at *least* one more." She leaned over the bed and kissed the top of R's head.

Regina's heart melted at the sight and then jumped in her chest when Emma simply slid right over to her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head as well. She then watched the blonde slip out of the room without another word.

Silence enveloped Regina and R for several long moments before R whispered, "I don't want to be like her."

Regina closed her eyes at the words and took a deep breath. "I know," she answered in a quiet sigh.

"Will I be?" R asked her. "Will I use my, my *magic*, to hurt people? I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to hurt my ... my child the way Mother-."

"No," Regina interrupted firmly. She felt R's words stab at her flesh like a thousand needles, driving through and pricking at her vulnerabilities. She reached over and slipped her hands into R's. "You would *never* hurt Henry. Don't even think on it. He is my everything, and he will be yours someday as well."

She watched R's shoulders sag as the teen let out a breath she'd been holding, the relief evident in her expression and in her body.

"And the ripple?" the teen asked. "That man, Mr. Gold ... he said I was the one who opened it. How?"

"I honestly have no idea," Regina confessed. "Magic is unpredictable sometimes, R. When I was your age, I didn't even know I *had* magic. I didn't find out until a few years later, so you are finding out before I did. It doesn't mean anything bad, though, so I don't want you to worry. You, we, are very powerful, but what you did wasn't bad. It was an accident."

"And it brought me here," R added.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Regina sighed. "You *directed* the ripple somehow with your desire."

"For love," R added. "I wanted love. I have read so many stories, and sometimes I am so lonely."

Regina's chest ached. "I know." She swallowed thickly and squeezed R's hands. "But you won't be."

R looked up at her then. A smile spread slowly over her lips. "Because of Emma," she whispered. "She is our True Love."

Regina's heart hammered heavily beneath her ribs. Every breath she took felt too shallow and burned in her nose and at the back of her throat. She wanted to deny the claim only because, for so many years, she had believed such a thing lost to her. It was hard for her to believe otherwise, but Gold had made it quite clear, and so had Emma. Somewhere in time, her younger self had thought about True Love and then opened a portal that took her to Emma.

Regina knew that her destiny and Emma's had always been intertwined, but she never imagined it would be like this, in this way. But then, signs didn't get much clearer than this, did they? R had literally fallen right out of time and on top of Emma. If that wasn't like fate slapping them in the face with a heavy dose of 'get it together', then Regina didn't know what else it could possibly be.

Emma Swan was her True Love. Infuriating, annoying, charming, beautiful Emma Swan, the woman who Regina once thought was the end of everything was her True Love. She wasn't the end. She was actually the beginning.

"Yes," she answered, the single word catching in her throat. Just saying it aloud was enough to make Regina's skin prickle and tingle from head to toe, a wave of heat rushing through her insides and making her feel dizzy. She took a deep breath and said the word again, that wave rising and rolling again in a thrilling rush. "Yes."

R smiled so brightly that it seemed to light the room. "What is it like?" she asked, squeezing Regina's hands and bouncing on top of the mattress.

Regina chuckled, the sound somewhat strangled in her throat.

"Overwhelming," she answered. It was the most honest answer she could give, and she imagined that wouldn't change anytime soon, or ever. The feeling of having a True Love, of finally knowing as much, and of realizing who that person was and sharing timid kisses and confessions ... overwhelming was the only word that seemed to fit.

R seemed satisfied with the choice. Her smile somehow only grew. "I always knew it would be," the teen said.

Silence enveloped them again as Regina only nodded, and then R whispered, "I wish I could have it sooner."

Regina sighed and leaned back against the headboard. "I know." Then, much like she had often done with a younger Henry, Regina patted the space beside her and let R settle in against her side. She wrapped an arm around her younger self, brushed R's long hair to the side, and rested her chin atop the teen's head.

"I want to say some things," Regina whispered, running her fingers through R's hair, "but I don't want you to worry or panic. Can you do that?"

R bit her bottom lip but then simply nodded against Regina's side.

Regina took a deep breath, unsure of where to start. There was so much she couldn't say, but some of it, she felt she needed to. She felt she had to. She felt the universe owed her this much; at least, it owed this version of her, this innocent version of her who still believed in all the things Regina, herself, had only learned to mourn and resent until now.

"Things are going to happen," she began and then hesitated. She didn't want to give too much away, so she took a moment to gather herself, and then tried again. "Things are going to happen in your life that you can't change, things that you won't be able to understand; things that will hurt you."

R tensed at Regina's side, but Regina just continued to stroke her hair until the teen relaxed into her again.

Regina felt a spark of pain ignite inside herself as she whispered, "There will come a time when you will feel broken. You will feel hopeless and afraid and angry, and I want you to know that that is okay. It's okay to feel all of those things. We all do at some point, because sometimes, life isn't fair. Sometimes, life can be ugly and terrifying and hard, and you will come to know that even more-so than you already do, and I'm ... I'm so sorry that you will have to face anything that will make you feel that way, but I'm so glad that you came through the ripple, R. I wasn't at first, because I am so different now than I was at your age, but I *am* now. I am glad, because now you know ..."

R's voice shook as she quietly asked, "Now I know what?"

Regina sighed atop R's head. "That it gets better." She squeezed the teen's shoulders. "It gets so much better. You will have happiness and a family to love and who loves you in return. You can have all the things you dream for, and you *will*. It may take longer than you wish, but it will happen. I want you to understand that. I want you to *know* that no matter how dark things get, there is light, even if you can't see it. Even if you feel like you might never find it, it *is* there. It took me a long time to realize that, and perhaps I am still learning, but it is true."

R shifted against Regina's side so that she could look up at her future self. A heavy gloss coated her eyes, a few tears having slipped down her cheeks. She held Regina's sorrowed gaze and whispered, "What is going to happen to me?"

Regina felt the burning in her throat, the tightness in her chest, and her eyes began to sting. She shook her head as she fought back building tears. "I can't say," she confessed. "I'm sorry. It is something you will need to discover on your own."

R sucked in a deep breath and nodded, simply accepting this.

Regina admired her resolve, her will. Even at a young age, when she was still so vulnerable and naïve, she was so very strong. She had forgotten what that felt like. Seeing her younger self so bold in the face of tragedies and terrors unknown made her ache but it also made her proud.

And then it was like something finally clicked into place. For the first time in perhaps her entire life, Regina admitted to herself that she was proud of herself, truly proud of a part of herself, and she had good reason to be. She lost her way so many years ago, but before that, she had been someone to be admired. She had been strong without abusing others. She had been kind without incentive or motive. She had been someone worth loving, worth sheltering.

It was in that moment that Regina realized that she felt like that version of herself again, more now than ever. She had been truly *good* for quite some

time now, and perhaps she wasn't the kindest, but she wasn't cruel either. She wasn't a monster. She wasn't evil.

This was what Emma had meant when she said Regina needed to believe that R was still a part of her, and she had been right.

For the first time in so many years, Regina didn't just *want* love. She felt like she truly deserved it. She felt like a person deserving of being loved and of loving in return, and as much as she had fought to deny it, she realized that she now had that. She had it with Emma.

It was new. It was ... a mystery; an unwritten book, but so ready to be written. It was real. It wasn't just a dream anymore, a distant hope. With Emma, it was real.

"There is so much I do not understand," R croaked, her head tucked against Regina's shoulder.

Regina sighed and combed her fingers through R's hair again. "I know," she whispered. "There is for me as well."

"But it gets better," R said, repeating Regina's earlier words like a desperate wish.

Regina nodded atop R's head. "So much better."

Emma spent a while in the kitchen and then watched some television in the living room before heading back upstairs to see if she was welcome to return yet. She met R in the hallway, the teen on her way back to the guestroom. Emma smiled at her and started to say something, but before she could do anything at all, R launched into her arms.

Emma caught R in a sudden embrace, the teen wrapping her arms tightly around Emma's neck and burying her face in blonde hair. Emma jolted, surprised, but then simply melted into the hug. "O-oh," she stuttered. "Okay." She wrapped her arms tightly around R and squeezed.

"You okay, kid?" she whispered into R's hair and felt the brunette nod atop her shoulder.

Emma glanced up then and saw Regina standing in her bedroom doorway, watching them. They held each other's gazes as Emma held R, rubbing a comforting hand along the teen's spine, and then Emma heard R whisper, "Thank you, Emma."

Emma squeezed her, brows furrowing as she looked at Regina, who only smiled sadly and continued to watch them. "What are you thanking me for?"

R sighed and melted further into Emma's embrace. "For loving me."

Emma felt those words hit her chest like a hammer and then climb up her throat and stick there. She held R a little tighter and, with her eyes still locked on Regina, said, "It's a privilege."

She watched those words wash over Regina and felt the corresponding shiver in R's body as she hugged the teen. R then pulled out of the hug and smiled at Emma.

"You really are romantic," R giggled, and Emma poked her side.

"I tried to tell you," the blonde chuckled, glancing up to see Regina biting her lip around a small smile.

"Well, goodnight then," R whispered, and Emma squeezed her arm.

"Night R."

When R slipped into the guestroom, Emma made her way over to Regina. She stepped into Regina's space, their bodies mere inches apart, and reached for Regina's hands. "You're not gonna change your mind and send me packing, are you?" Emma chuckled. "Because I really liked the way things were going earlier."

Regina sighed and shook her head. Her hands slipped into the front of Emma's shirt and pulled her forward, and all the words she thought she

should say, words she *wanted* to say, became nothing more than a guttural sigh against Emma's mouth.

Perhaps that single sigh meant more than any words ever could.

***Chapter 20*: Chapter 20**

A/N: The next chapter will be the last. I hope everyone enjoys this chapter, and thank you all for the continued support. I appreciate it so much. Enjoy! XO-Chrmdpoet

Chapter Twenty

Regina frowned and wrinkled her nose when she felt fingers brush across her cheek and through her hair. Someone was touching her. Someone was touching her while she was sleeping. Someone was in her bedroom, touching her while she was sleeping.

"Hey, Regina, wake up."

Regina's eyes snapped open as she startled. "What—Oh," she mumbled.

Emma jerked back when Regina woke, but then she simply shook her head and laughed. "You'd think you'd be used to waking up with me in your bed after the last couple days," she chuckled. "But I'm surprised I didn't get a fist to the face just now."

Regina smiled softly and slipped her hand over Emma's knee where the blonde sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at her. "I'm not accustomed to waking up with someone in my bed. I'm afraid it will take more than a day or two of difference to change that."

"So, you'll just be surprised every time you wake up to my awesome face?" Emma joked, and Regina squeezed her knee.

"For a while, yes," she replied. "It is certainly a welcome surprise, though, dear. Does that help?"

Emma grinned. "A little," she teased, "but a kiss might help more."

Regina rolled her eyes but wrapped her hand in Emma's t-shirt and pulled her down regardless. She pressed a soft kiss to Emma's cheek and then to

her chin and then to her lips. "Better?" she whispered.

"Hm," Emma hummed, pursing her lips. "Eh, maybe. I mean, I *guess*. Might need another one to be sure or maybe several more. Maybe we should just plan to work on that some more later."

Regina chuckled raggedly and shook her head as she cupped Emma's cheek and rubbed her thumb along the blonde's jaw. "I see," she replied. "I suppose we could arrange that."

Emma smiled and leaned in to kiss Regina again. She then nodded her head toward the bedroom door and said, "Now get up and come with me, because there's something you gotta see."

Sighing, Regina asked, "Should I prepare my angry expression, my amused expression, or my angrily amused expression?"

Emma laughed and poked Regina's side. "It's amazing how I have an exact image in my mind of each one of those."

"My face is reliable in that way, dear," Regina chuckled.

Emma slipped her arm around over Regina's waist and around her back. Her fingers slipped up the blanket and then dipped under to rub across Regina's bare shoulder blades. "Mm," she hummed. "Your face was definitely reliable last night, or more specifically your mouth."

Regina laughed and pulled her down into another kiss. "So then perhaps instead of dragging me off somewhere, you should drag yourself back into bed," she whispered against Emma's lips.

Groaning, Emma pressed her forehead to Regina's. "Stop tempting me."

"Evil and temptation tend to go hand-in-hand," Regina teased, and Emma chuckled against her lips.

"Well, it's a good thing you're not evil anymore."

"Ah, but still rather tempting," Regina countered.

"And proud of it," Emma added, and Regina nodded against her forehead. "Good, because you should be, but you seriously won't want to miss what I'm about to show you, so as much as I don't want you to get dressed, get dressed."

Regina sighed and threw back the covers. She reveled in the desire that instantly flamed in Emma's eyes and cheeks, and she made quite the show of sauntering across the room to get her robe. She bit her lip as she heard Emma groan again behind her, and Regina knew the blonde would be paying her back soon.

Regina slipped on her robe and motioned toward the door. "Shall we?" she asked. "Or are we leaving the house, because I would prefer to shower before I actually dress for the day?"

Emma gaped a moment longer before licking her lips and dragging her gaze back up to Regina's eyes. "Um, what? No, we're just going downstairs." She jumped to her feet and headed toward the door. "Right, yeah, let's go."

Regina followed along behind her, grin firmly in place.

They crept down the stairs, and Emma had to clamp a hand over her mouth to keep from laughing when the first shrill shriek echoed up to them from the living room. She glanced back at Regina who looked ready to fly down the stairs and start hurling fireballs at whoever had dared invade her home and attack her younger self. Emma shook her head quickly at Regina and smiled.

"Just wait," she whispered. "It's hilarious."

"She just shrieked!" Regina hissed. "I do *not* shriek. I don't see how anything warranting such a sound would be hilarious."

"Stop whispering such long sentences," Emma hissed back. "It's weird." She chuckled when Regina smacked her shoulder and glared. "Just kidding, but seriously wait for it. It's so funny."

"We'll see about that," Regina replied and followed Emma to the bottom of the stairs.

Several more shrieks and squeaks, which Regina found unacceptable for the voice of a formidable foe, continued to echo from the living room. As she and Emma drew nearer, however, other sounds joined the echoes, and understanding quickly began to dawn on Regina.

They rounded the corner into the living room and stood out of sight as they watched Henry try to guide R through the terrifying trials of one of his many video games.

R's entire body was tense as she perched on the edge of the couch, eyes wide and glued on the television screen across the room. Her hands gripped the controller so tightly that her knuckles were chalk white.

Emma clamped her hand over her mouth again to keep from laughing as R let out another shrill squeak and shouted, "Henry! Here it comes! What do I do?! I am going to be eaten!"

"You're not gonna be eaten," Henry laughed, sitting beside her on the couch. "Just calm down and remember the commands I taught you."

"Oh no!" R squawked. "Oh no! X! X! No, circle!"

Emma looked over at Regina and had to choke back another burst of laughter when she saw the brunette straining to hold in her own, Regina's face pulled tight with the effort.

"I told you," Emma whispered, voice strained.

"What even *is* this game? I don't recall buying anything with aliens in it. Is this a mature-rated game?"

"Uh," Emma muttered. "I might have gotten it for the kid. Sorry."

Regina side-eyed Emma and shook her head, but a smile visibly pulled at her lips. The moment was simply too wonderful and humorous to spoil with a lecture.

"No, there is another one!" R shrieked. "Henry, you take it, please! The necromunch is going to eat me! You do it!"

Henry laughed out loud as he said, "It's a *necromorph*, R, and it's not gonna eat you. Just relax and try to remember what to do."

"Oh no," R mumbled as she tapped frantically at the buttons on the controller, eyes glued to the screen. "Oh gods. Oh no. I do not like this. I do *not* like this one bit. Oh no. Here it comes. Here it comes, Henry."

Emma snorted hard enough to make her throat ache when R pressed the wrong command and the necromorph began attacking the character onscreen. She leaned on Regina, both their shoulders shaking with laughter, as R wailed, "Oh no! It is getting me! I am being eaten, Henry!"

Regina had actual tears in her eyes from laughing when she choked out, "Oh Henry, just take the controller before she has a panic attack."

Henry startled, glancing over his shoulder to see his moms watching them, Regina wiping tears from her cheeks and Emma leaning on Regina, clutching her side.

"Oh god, it hurts," Emma croaked, holding her side. "It hurts from laughing."

Henry laughed and shook his head before grabbing the controller from R. "All right. I'll do it, but you can try again in a minute," he told her, and R nodded eagerly.

She turned to look at the women lingering behind the couch and smiled a tense smile. "Hello," she greeted them, cheeks tinting a soft pink. "Henry was showing me this gaming device. It is terrifying."

Regina and Emma burst into laughter again and Regina pushed Emma toward the couch. Emma made her way over and plopped down beside R while Regina dropped into the space beside Henry.

"Yeah, these games freak a lot of people out," Emma told R, wrapping an arm around her. She smiled when the teen leaned into her embrace, cheeks still dusted pink. "So don't be embarrassed."

"Even you?" R asked quietly, and Emma nodded.

"Even me," she admitted. "I jumped clear off the couch and spilled a bowl of popcorn everywhere the first time I played this game."

A smile spread slowly across R's lips and she leaned further into Emma's embrace. "Are you only saying that to make me feel better?" she asked.

"No way," Emma promised. "I scare easily. You should have seen me when I fought a dragon. I was completely freaked out."

R's eyes blew wide as her lips parted around a gasp. "You *fought* a dragon?"

Emma grinned. "It's a long story, but yeah, I fought a dragon *and* rescued Regina all in the same night." She leaned forward so that she could see Regina around Henry's body, the boy's focus still locked on the game he had taken over, and Emma smirked when Regina rolled her eyes. "Isn't that right, Regina?"

"Yes, dear," Regina drawled. "You truly are every bit the Savior you were prophesied to be, though failing to realize you were being manipulated into handing over the egg was a slight hiccup in your heroic tale, was it not?"

Emma chuckled and shook her head. "Geez, way to kill the moment," she laughed, and Regina grinned wickedly.

"The air was thinning around your ego," the brunette joked, smirking. "My lungs were beginning to ache. I had to think of the children."

R giggled and Emma poked at her side. "Oh, you think that's funny, do you?" she teased, and R squirmed under her tickling fingers.

Regina smiled as she observed the ease that existed between her younger self and her new lover. Where it had once sparked tiny bursts of jealousy or frustration or worry, it now only warmed her. It was lovely to see her

younger self experiencing such carefree moments of joy, especially when Regina could only look back on that time in her life as one of hardship and heartache.

She snapped back to reality when the loud chime of the doorbell echoed through the house, and everyone froze on the couch. Well, everyone except Henry froze on the couch. He went about his game unfazed while the others glanced to one another and then to the door.

"Uh, maybe I should take R into another room?" Emma asked quietly, knowing it was best if no one knew about R's presence in Storybrooke.

Regina nodded. "Yes, and I will see who is at the door." She tapped Henry's shoulder as she stood and passed in front of him. "Volume," she said, and Henry quickly turned the TV down a few notches before getting back into his game.

Regina made her way to the door and took a breath before pulling it open. "Oh," she sighed, face falling. "It's you."

Snow White smiled her usual bright smile despite Regina's less than enthusiastic greeting. "Regina," she greeted with a nod. "I was wondering if Emma was here. She hasn't been around the last couple of days, and she has only answered a few of my texts."

"She's almost thirty, Snow," Regina drawled. "Does she have a curfew? Has she failed to do her chores? Have you come to ground her?"

Snow sighed and shook her head. "I don't care what anyone says, Regina," she deadpanned. "Your humor is *truly* unmatched."

Regina arched a brow and let a small smile tug up the right corner of her mouth. "Sarcasm suits you, Snow. You should exchange it for your typical sunny disposition."

"I will certainly take it under advisement," Snow replied. "Is Emma here?"

"She is," Regina admitted. "Shall I collect her for you or would you like to charge in and rescue her from whatever evils I am undoubtedly committing against her in the hand-carved torture chamber I keep deep in the bowels of the home?"

Regina smiled when she heard Henry's chuckle echo in from the living room, and she even found it pleasant when Snow, herself, laughed at the remark.

"Oh, a little torture never killed anyone," Snow sighed, shrugging a shoulder. "Send her out once you've unchained her."

Regina had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. Since when does Snow White joke around with her and about torture no less? Strange, but then things had been strange for a while now. The Charmings no longer treated her like a monster on the verge of a rampage any second, despite how much Regina still liked to joke that they and others still thought her evil. Perhaps some still did, but Regina knew that at least a few in the small town truly respected the changes she had made and were content to let her start again and anew. It had been a long and difficult road to get to that point, but she had finally reached it.

Still, it didn't make them friends. Regina certainly wouldn't go that far, and she couldn't deny that she still held grudges against the other woman and Snow undoubtedly still carried her own against Regina. Regina could, however, admit that they no longer fit the label of 'enemies'. Perhaps they hadn't for a while now.

Regina nodded and motioned for Snow to step inside. "I will tell her you're here," she told Snow. "Henry is in the living room if you prefer to wait in there."

Snow nodded and headed toward the living room while Regina went off in search of Emma and R.

She found them in her study, sitting on the couch and talking about the game R had been playing. Regina smiled as R let out a soft laugh and nudged Emma's shoulder, to which Emma chuckled and nudged her right

back. Regina cleared her throat and motioned toward the door when they turned to face her.

"It's your mother," she informed, and Emma sighed.

"Yeah, I'm surprised she waited this long to show up."

"Oh," R interjected, looking to her older self. "Is that the woman we despise?"

Regina blinked a few times and considered saying something along the lines of 'Despise is a strong word' or 'Not quite as much as we used to', but all that came out was, "Yes."

Emma snorted and shook her head, and the words Regina had only just been considering came from the blonde instead. "Don't you think 'despise' is a little much?"

Regina smirked and propped a hand on her hip. "Perhaps," she muttered, "though we certainly aren't friends."

"One of these days," Emma told her, grinning, and R giggled.

"Why do we not like Emma's mother?" she asked.

Regina sighed and waved her hand dismissively. "It's quite a long story, dear, and believe me, living it is more than enough. You won't want to hear about it before *or* after you experience it, so perhaps it is better if we don't get into it."

When R's smile fell and she muttered a quiet, "Okay," Regina's heart ached.

"Very well," Regina sighed. "If you *must* know, there are many reasons, not the least of which being that her name is Snow White and she thinks she is as pure as the name suggests."

"Is she?" R asked.

Regina's brows rose on her forehead. "Is anyone?" she challenged.

R smiled and blushed as she mumbled, "Emma."

Regina snorted when Emma waggled her eyebrows at Regina and nodded. "Oh, R, please, you are making us look like a love-struck teenager."

R's blush deepened even as her smile widened and she said, "I *am* a love-struck teenager."

Regina and Emma both chuckled as Regina replied, "Ah, excellent point, dear."

Emma clapped her hands together a moment later and said, "All right, Reginas. I'm going to go deal with my mom and then we can do lunch. I'm starving."

"No spilling the beans about R," Regina called as Emma grinned and made her way out of the study.

"My lips are sealed!" Emma called back and then she was gone.

Snow jumped up from the couch, where she had been watching Henry play video games with a grimace glued onto her face, when Emma entered the living room. "Emma," she greeted brightly.

Emma smiled her typical lopsided grin and let her mother pull her into a hug. "Hey," she said, patting Snow's back. "Regina said you were looking for me. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, of course," Snow assured. "We just haven't seen you or heard much from you the last couple of days. I wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"Oh," Emma replied, nodding, "yeah, everything's great."

"Great," Snow chirped, squeezing Emma's arm affectionately. "So, you've been staying here then?" she asked quietly, glancing around the living room. "With Regina?"

Emma smacked her lips as she rocked on her heels and nodded. "Uh, yeah, yup. This is where I've been."

Snow's smile seemed almost strained as she asked, "Any particular reason?"

"Oh, uh, well," Emma stuttered, trying to think of a quick excuse. She glanced to her son on the couch and swallowed thickly before saying, "Just been spending some extra time with the kid, you know. Regina and I, we thought maybe it would be a good idea to hang out as a family or whatever for a few days."

Snow's eyes narrowed in that manner that Emma had come to recognize as complete disbelief and she knew her mother wasn't buying it. "Uh huh," Snow hummed. "No other reason?"

Emma stared at her sock-covered feet as she muttered, "Nope."

"I see," Snow said, "and there's *nothing* else you want to tell me? Nothing at all?"

Emma laughed awkwardly and scratched at the back of her neck. "Like what?"

Snow lowered her voice to a whisper and hissed, "Like you and Regina being in a secret relationship!"

Emma nearly swallowed her tongue as she gasped and shook her head. "What? No! Why would you even—" Snow stared at her, deadpan, and Emma just sighed and gave it up. "Okay, yeah, but it *just* started so it's totally new and she's been freaked out about it so don't let her know you know or she might panic and change her mind. How did you even know?"

Snow smiled smugly. "Oh, Emma, I was a bandit and a hunter for years. I'm very observant. You two have been dancing around this for a while now."

Emma rolled her eyes. "Thanks for the hot tip there, Mom. You could have saved us a lot of time by pointing that out sooner."

"Oh, you know you would have only denied it if I had," Snow argued, and Emma couldn't deny the truth in the statement. "I only suspected one of you had finally made a move when I saw you with Regina the other day outside of Granny's. You were both so shocked to have been caught together that Regina couldn't even properly insult me, not to mention the fact that she would *never* transform herself to show what she looked like when she was younger for just *anyone*. If I ever requested as much, she would likely toss me another cursed apple. It was obvious, and then you didn't come home, and it was even *more* obvious."

Emma stood rigidly beside her mother and smiled the most forced smile her face could manage, because her skin was crawling with the awkwardness of the situation. "Uh, yeah, that's what happened," she replied stiffly. "You called it. Can't get anything by you."

Snow smiled triumphantly and nodded. "So, does Henry know? How did he take it?"

"Maybe we should talk about this later, like tomorrow," Emma told her, glancing over Snow's shoulder to the couch. She glared when she saw her son staring at them and covering his mouth to keep from laughing.

Snow turned to look as well, and Henry smoothly went right back to his game so that she was none the wiser. "Oh, right, of course," Snow giggled. "I just wanted to check in anyway. Will you be coming by tomorrow?"

"Yeah," Emma promised. "I'll do my best."

Snow nodded and kissed Emma's cheek before shuffling from the house, and once the sound of the front door closing echoed back to them, Emma leveled Henry with a hard stare and an arched eyebrow.

"You know about me and your mom?" she asked, and Henry laughed.

"Duh."

***Chapter 21*: Chapter 21**

A/N: Hello everyone! This is the final chapter of this story. I apologize for the long wait on this chapter. I've had extreme technical difficulties as of late and life has simply gotten in the way otherwise. I do want to take a moment to thank everyone who has stuck with me throughout this story. Thank you for favoriting, following, and reviewing. The support and love means more to me than I can say. This story has been such a joy to write and will always have a special place in my heart. I hope you enjoy this final chapter. Take care, XO.

Chapter Twenty-One

Breakfast the following morning was somber, heavy with the weight of the day's events. Henry picked at his plate, his face smashed against his hand, elbow propped on the table. Emma and Regina both kept their eyes on their plates, eating slowly and quietly, and R seemed not to be able to eat at all.

Gold had called at the crack of dawn, Regina's cell ringing out like a sad warning, and informed her that the memory potion was ready and that he was prepared to re-open the ripple. As soon as Regina repeated the words to Emma and then to Henry and R, silence had enveloped the house.

R sipped at her juice but only used her fork to push her eggs around her plate. Her stomach was in knots, and her heart had been racing since Regina woke her. Dread pooled low in her gut and radiated out through her limbs until she felt it in every part of her body. She wasn't ready to leave. She wanted more time with this family, *her* family.

She cleared her throat, but her voice still cracked when she quietly asked, "May I be excused?"

Regina looked up, surprised and concerned. "Of course," she answered. "Is everything al—"

R was out the door and into the backyard before Regina could even finish her question, and the words died in her throat. She glanced to Emma who looked on the verge of crying and also really annoyed about that fact.

Emma rubbed at her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "This day sucks," she grumbled, and Henry nodded his agreement.

Regina swallowed thickly and reached over to place her hand on top of Emma's. When the blonde looked up at her, Regina tilted her head toward the back door in question. "Should we?"

Emma sighed and shrugged. "I don't know," she replied. "Maybe she wants to be alone."

"Maybe she doesn't," Regina countered.

They both looked to Henry, surprised, when he chimed in to say, "I'll go."

He slipped from his seat without another word, letting his fork fall to his plate with a clatter.

Henry found R under one of the taller trees in their backyard, seated in the grass with her knees pulled up to her chest and her chin resting atop them. He dropped into the space beside her and bumped his shoulder against hers.

"I'm sad too," he told her quietly.

R smiled softly at him and wrapped an arm around his back, patting him gently. "At least you still have both your mothers," she told him. "I am returning to a time where none of you yet exist in my life."

Henry shrugged as he picked at the grass and leaned into R's embrace. "Yeah, but there are a lot of good things you can look forward to that if you stayed here you would never get to experience."

"Like what?" R asked, and Henry shrugged again.

"I don't know." He pulled small blades of grass from the earth and let them scatter from his palm in the soft breeze. "Like getting to fall in love, I guess."

Or you know, growing up and learning new things and getting really good at magic like Mom is."

R smiled and squeezed him. "Yes, I suppose that is true."

"Oh, and getting to see me as a baby and watch me grow up and stuff," Henry added, turning to grin at her. "You definitely don't want to miss *that*, right? I was a really cute baby."

R chuckled softly and wiped at her wet eyes. "I do not doubt that Henry. I am sure you were the most beautiful baby."

"Well yeah," Henry laughed, nudging R's arm again with his elbow.

The laughter died slowly and then silence settled in on them. Henry felt his stomach stir uncomfortably as all the moments he wished he could take back flooded into his mind. All the horrible things he had said to his mother in the last few years stood out boldly in his memory and made him feel sick to his stomach. He knew he couldn't take them back and most days he reminded himself that he had been younger and confused and irrational, but meeting R, seeing how and who his mother had been long before anyone had ever tacked 'evil' onto her name, changed everything.

It made it all real. It blasted through the black and white and made it all bright and colorful. It made Henry feel closer to his mother than ever before, like he was seeing her, *really* seeing all of her, for the first time.

She wasn't just a bad person who decided to be better, do better, be good. She was a good person who had a lot of really bad things happen to her. She was a good person who did some really bad things. She was a good person who lived and suffered and changed and suffered and changed again. She was a good person. She was a *person*, not some character in a book. She was his mother.

"Mom?" he whispered.

R startled at the title. It blasted over her and then sunk in and grew warm. Joy sparked in her heart and she smiled as she reached up and ran a hand

through Henry's hair. "Yes?" she replied quietly.

Henry sighed, a broken sound that made R want to pull him closer. She didn't have to, though, as he simply turned and sank into her. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed.

"I love you," he whispered, and R's eyes stung with tears as she smiled and squeezed him in return.

This boy was such a special part of her life, even if she couldn't yet feel the full weight of that truth. He was a part of *her*, a part of her heart. He was a precious reminder of the love she would soon know. He was her son, the most precious thing she would ever have in her life.

R turned her face inward and pressed a soft kiss to Henry's cheek as he held onto her. "I love you too, Henry," she promised. "I so look forward to getting to know you all over again."

Henry laughed at himself as he pulled out of the embrace and wiped at his eyes. He ducked his head and picked at the grass again. "Yeah," he said, nodding, "me too."

Gold stood on the grass near the invisible time ripple, hands clasped over the top of his cane, watching as Emma, Henry, and the two Reginas exited Regina's car and made their way toward him. The bright sun shining down on them did little to lighten their collective mood; that much was obvious to Gold. The corner of his mouth tugged up just slightly when Henry ran ahead of the group and slipped into the space beside him.

"Henry," Gold acknowledged. When the boy looked up at him, he arched a brow and quietly asked, "I trust everything worked out the way you wanted?" He hadn't missed the close proximity between Emma and the elder Regina, the way their arms brushed, fingers twitching toward one another but never actually tangling.

Henry smiled despite the spark of sadness in his eyes and nodded. "Operation R was a total success," he confirmed, and Gold chuckled.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"Don't you think this is a little risky?" Emma asked as the remaining three approached. She glanced around them to make sure no one was watching. "Us meeting out in the open like this? What if someone sees R?"

"No need to worry, Sheriff," Gold assured. "I've taken the necessary precautions."

Emma turned to arch a questioning brow at Regina, who nodded, sensing the magic.

"A protective barrier," Regina confirmed, and Emma shrugged.

"Okay then."

R stood silently at Regina's side, her eyes fixed on the ground. She couldn't bring herself to look up, couldn't bring herself to acknowledge that this really was the moment of goodbye.

Gold sighed as he glanced between R, Regina, and Emma, the group growing quiet and obviously uncomfortable. "Knowing your shared aversion to feeling," he said, pinning Emma and Regina with an amused stare, "I imagine it's safe to assume you didn't take care of your lengthy, emotional goodbyes ahead of time."

Emma chewed on her bottom lip, suddenly crawling in her skin, and shifted from foot to foot while Regina rolled her eyes and folded her arms over her chest.

Gold chuckled and nodded. "I thought as much." He placed a hand on Henry's back and gently nudged him toward R. "Well, let's get on with it then, dearies. I haven't got all day."

R finally looked up as Henry took a few steps toward her, and their eyes met. He looked much like she felt, the sadness and longing evident in his eyes. A part of him wished she could stay, just like a part of her wished she could as well.

"Um, I don't really know what to say," Henry mumbled, and R did her best to prevent any tears from falling as she forced a small smile to the surface.

"I believe you said it all this morning," she replied. She then held her arms open. "A hug, perhaps?"

Henry smiled and stepped into her embrace. He closed his eyes and squeezed her tightly. They held onto one another for a long time before Emma cleared her throat, and they finally broke apart to find the blonde standing right next to them.

Eyes watering, Emma gave Henry a lazy smile and swiped a hand through his hair before turning to face R. "Uh, I guess this is goodbye," she said, her voice scratchy and rough.

A tear dropped down R's cheek, the teen no longer able to hold it at bay, and she nodded. "I suppose so, yes."

Emma shuffled in place for a moment, her hands stuffed down into the back pockets of her jeans before she blew out a harsh sigh and said, "Come here, kid."

R went into her arms and sighed against her shoulder. She let out a watery laugh as she said, "I told you I am not a child."

Emma chuckled against the base of R's head where a long braid began its trail down the teen's back. "You're right," she admitted, holding R as tight as she could without hurting her. She glanced up at Regina and noticed that the brunette's eyes were closed, her bottom lip trembling slightly, and it only made her want to hold both Reginas as long and as tight as possible. "I'm gonna miss you."

R sighed and squeezed Emma a little tighter. "You will not forget me, will you Emma?"

Emma pulled out of the embrace but kept her hands on R's shoulders. She locked gazes with the teen, tears swirling in both their eyes. "Of course not," she promised. "I could never forget you. Never."

R laughed despite her tears and nodded. She reached up to wipe gently at her cheeks. "I look forward to meeting you again soon." She hesitated, blushing slightly, before adding, "And falling in love with you."

Emma smiled, a few tears finally breaking over and running down her cheeks. "Me too," she whispered, and then she pulled R in for a final hug. She pressed a kiss to the top of R's head before she stepped away and wrapped an arm around Henry, who was doing his best to discreetly wipe away his own tears.

Regina hated the burning ache that seemed to have infiltrated every cell in her body as she stepped over to her younger self and did her best to keep her composure. She was surprised when R reached out and grabbed her hand, lacing their fingers together, but she squeezed the teen's hand and took a much-needed breath.

"Perhaps things will be a little different for me," R whispered, and Regina's heart clenched almost painfully in her chest at the sound of the hope lacing R's voice. "Perhaps it will not be so difficult for me."

Regina swallowed thickly and hated the way her voice cracked when she smiled at her younger self, squeezed her hand, and quietly said, "Perhaps not." She wasn't going to strip away her hope, not when she knew what it was to truly have none, to be empty.

A beautiful smile touched R's lips and then Regina found herself engulfed in a warm, tight embrace. She stilled for only a moment before slowly lifting her arms to wrap around R as well. As she patted a hand atop R's back, she remembered the magic she had earlier performed on the teen, and while it pained her to undo the spell, she knew she could not change the past or cause Cora any suspicion. So, she took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and willed away the magic she had used to erase R's scars. When she sensed the counter-spell's completion, she sighed and rubbed small circles into R's back and held her tighter.

"Be happy," R whispered to her. "Promise me you will be happy."

Regina choked on the sob she forced down and quiet but her breath shuddered almost violently as she let it out against R's shoulder. She hesitated only a moment before nodding. "I promise," she whispered.

The embrace ended too soon, but Regina let R go. She sucked in a sharp, relieving breath when Emma stepped instantly to her side and placed a comforting hand on her lower back. Henry settled in front of her, pressing his back to her stomach and pulling her arms around his neck. They watched, together, as R approached Mr. Gold, finally ready to return home.

Gold smiled at the teen as she nodded to let him know she was ready, and he reached into the pocket of his blazer to retrieve a small vial. "Memory potion," he said as he held the vial out to her.

R frowned, her chest tight and aching. "Must I forget?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so, dearie," Gold told her.

She hesitated before sighing and reaching for the vial, the blue liquid inside sloshing around. She popped out the cork and held the vial to her lips. Before she tipped it back, though, she turned to take one last look at the three people behind her. She held their faces firmly in her mind and in her heart and then tipped back her head and let the potion slither down her throat.

When she began to glow a soft blue, Gold nodded and turned toward the open air where he knew the time ripple to be. He held up his hands and began to mutter under his breath, and a moment later, the air split wide open like someone had unzipped the sky and Gold urged R to step through before the glow dissipated and her memories disappeared entirely and she began to question where she was.

R closed her eyes. She couldn't look back again. She wouldn't allow herself to. She took a deep breath, and with a heavy heart, she stepped through into the ripple.

The air sealed itself up again and it was as if it had never opened, and Emma, Regina, and Henry stood in the silence, holding one another and

staring at the empty space where R had only just been.

Henry let out a soft breath and leaned his head back against his mother's chest. "Bye R," he whispered into the silence.

Henry fastened his seat-belt with a click as he and his mothers settled back into Regina's car to head home. "Can we walk to Granny's for lunch and milkshakes after we take the car home?" he asked. He was fairly certain a milkshake could make him feel at least a tiny bit better about having to say goodbye to R.

Regina cleared her throat, her voice still scratchy from before. "Why would we walk to Granny's, Henry, when we are already in the car and can drive there?"

"Yeah, kid," Emma chimed in. "Are you hurting for exercise or something?" She forced out a chuckle despite how awkward and unsettling it felt to reach for joy so soon after saying goodbye. She did her best anyway, because they needed laughter now. They needed comfort, family, and like Henry suggested, good food and milkshakes. They needed to start the healing process rather than dwell on the loss of someone they had all grown to love immensely in only a couple of days.

"I just want to walk," Henry answered, kicking his feet gently against the back of Emma's seat.

Regina and Emma glanced to one another before nodding in silent agreement, and Regina started the car and began the short drive back to 108 Mifflin Street. When they arrived, Regina parked the car and said, "I just need to run in for a moment and then we can go."

Emma watched as the brunette headed toward the front door and disappeared inside. She waited only a moment before following, dragging Henry along with her. She told him to wait in the foyer before making her way upstairs.

She found Regina in the master bathroom, leaning over the sink as she stared at her reflection and carefully touched up her makeup. Emma leaned against the bedroom door frame and watched her for a moment before quietly saying, "You look great."

Regina only slightly startled before glancing toward Emma and then back to the mirror. "I hate crying," she replied, and Emma nodded despite the fact that the woman wasn't looking at her.

"Me too," she said as she pushed off the door frame and made her way toward Regina. When she stepped into the bathroom, she hesitated only a moment before moving in behind Regina. She pressed the full front of her body against Regina's back, slipping her arms around the brunette's waist, and settled her chin atop Regina's shoulder so that they could look at each other in the mirror.

Regina stiffened in the embrace at first but then quickly melted into Emma. She let out a soft sigh as they locked gazes in the mirror and Emma smiled at her.

"I'm really going to miss her," the blonde whispered, and Regina nodded. "At least we still have each other though. I mean, we finally figured this thing out and now that we've gotten through the hard parts, we—"

"There aren't hard *parts*, Emma," Regina cut in, her hand slipping down to rub along the length of Emma's arms, still wrapped around her waist. "It's *all* hard. Relationships are hard. This is hard. It will continue to be hard."

Emma frowned. "Yeah but hard doesn't always have to be bad. It just makes it more worthwhile, right?"

"It does," Regina whispered, leaning her head against Emma's and continuing to hold her gaze in the mirror. "The point, though, is that it isn't easy. It won't always be easy. R told me to be happy, and I want to be. I think I could be happy with you, Emma. I think we could be happy, but it won't always be easy. I want to be in this, and I know I can be, but I want ... I need to know—"

"That I'm gonna stick around even when it gets harder," Emma filled in, and it wasn't even a question.

Regina's tongue felt too thick for her mouth once the words were out, so she didn't speak. She only nodded and waited for Emma to yell or to walk out or to change her mind. She lost her breath entirely when, instead, a slow smile spread over Emma's lips.

"I'm in this," the blonde whispered.

They stared at one another in silence for a long moment before Regina quietly said, "We are both in this."

She didn't pose it as a question but Emma knew Regina expected some form of confirmation. "We're both in this," Emma repeated back to the brunette, and she watched as Regina let out a heavy breath and nodded. A moment later, Regina spun in her arms and wrapped fully around her.

"Are you guys coming?"

They both pulled from the embrace, startled by Henry's shout from downstairs, before looking back to one another. A small smile pulled at Emma's lips and then at Regina's and then without a word, they made their way downstairs.

Henry turned around to walk backwards in front of his mothers as they all made their way to Granny's. "So, we're going to be a family now, right?" he asked, glancing between them. "All of us together?"

Regina's shoulder brushed against Emma's as they walked side by side, both of them staring at their son. She looked over at Emma and then back to Henry. "Would that be okay with you?" she asked him.

"Hm, well," Henry said, tapping his index finger to his chin, "I could probably be persuaded with an extra helping of fries and extra whip cream on my milkshake."

"Done!" Emma chimed before Regina could even open her mouth to answer. She smiled apologetically at Regina, though her laughter made the gesture less sincere. "What?" she blurted as Regina playfully glared at her. "Do you want the kid's approval or not?"

Regina merely shook her head and sighed, and Henry pumped a fist in triumph before running a little ahead of his mothers. "Stay in sight," Regina called from behind, and Henry waved a hand over his head to ensure her he wouldn't go too far ahead of them.

Emma and Regina walked together in silence for a moment before their shoulders brushed again and Emma asked, "So, is it too soon for public hand-holding? I mean, you haven't even said you love me back yet."

Regina smiled though her eyes remained fixed on Henry. "I think hand-holding typically precedes love confessions, dear."

"It probably typically precedes sex too, but well, you know," Emma replied quietly, and they both blushed.

Regina chuckled, the sound low and melodic, as her fingers slipped over Emma's and then settled in the spaces between. "Satisfied?" she asked.

Emma's grin grew wider as she replied, "It'll do, Queenie. It'll do."

Their shared laughter faded into silence shortly after and they walked the final distance to Granny's in comfortable quiet. Regina watched as Henry disappeared through the front door of the diner, but before Emma could follow him, Regina squeezed the blonde's hand and gently tugged her back.

"Emma wait," she said.

Emma surprised her by turning swiftly, slipping her free hand around the back of Regina's neck and pulling her in for a soft, warm kiss. Their hands remained clasped between their bodies as they melted into the impromptu kiss, and when they pulled apart, Emma smiled at Regina and said, "I know."

Regina felt the words spark across her heart. "You do?" she whispered.

"I do," Emma told her and then tugged Regina toward the door. "Come on."

Regina couldn't help the smile that stretched her lips as she nodded and let Emma lead her into Granny's. R's words echoed in her mind as she slid into a booth beside Emma and across from their son who was already arguing with Emma over which milkshake flavor was best.

Be happy.

She was.